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Vol. VI, No. 6 JANUARY, 1942

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THE BLACK RIDER OF CHENANGO PASS ..... *By Cliff Campbell* 8

Chenango Pass . . . . that dreaded passageway between Lodeville and Red River . . . . named for the ruthless Indians who had once taken possession of it, and now tenanted by white outlaws who plunder and murder all who dare enter it . . . . until THE BLACK RIDER rode into this hellway with sixguns snarling their death song, to blast back into the hell that spawned them, a killer and his Colt crew . . . .

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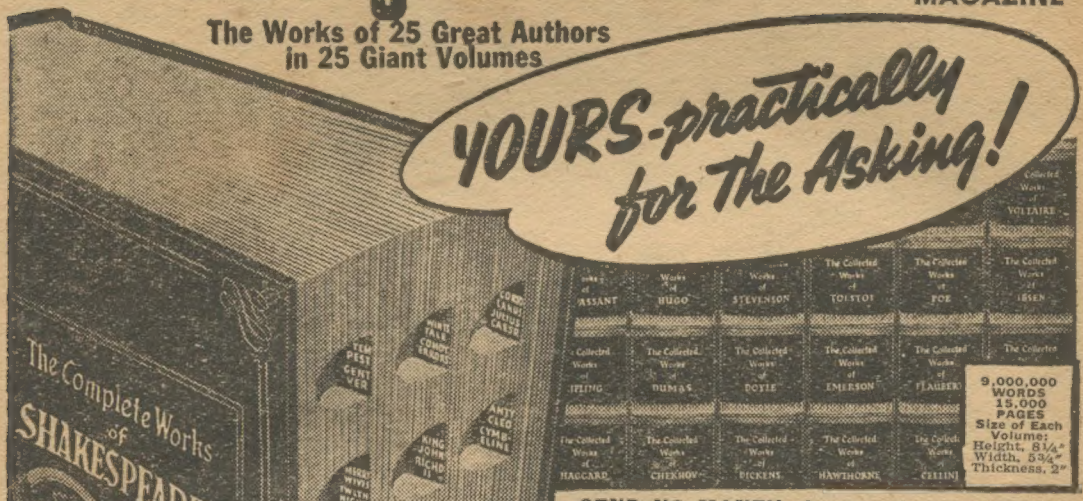

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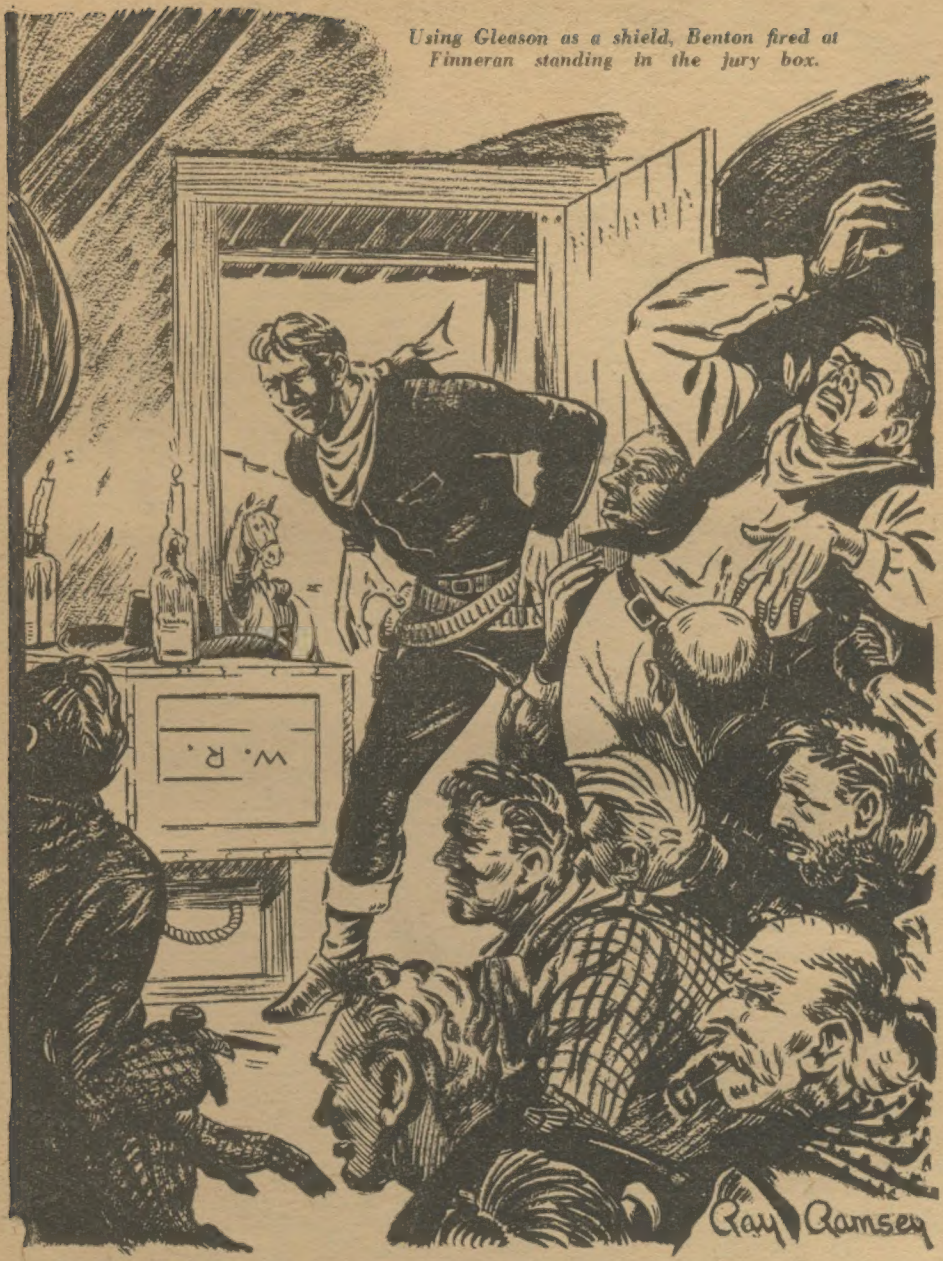

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CHAPTER I

THE last glow of the setting sun beyond the distant horizon faded away into nothingness. Dusk followed swiftly, even before the last red reflection in the limitless sky had gone, and cast a billowing veil of shadowy darkness earthward. Swiftly the veil unfolded and spread out, obscuring the prairie and dimming and softening the harsh outlines of the rugged hills and the gaunt towering mountains that loomed up behind them, tempering too the silver river that wound past the hills like a gleaming necklace of pearls wound around the throat of a dusky maiden.

Swift, cooling breezes swept down from the lofty mountain peaks, droned through the corridors of the drab, sullen hills and raced noisily and breathlessly over the river and the far-flung range. Then almost immediately it was night and the all-enveloping darkness deepened to the extreme. Night brought silence to the range, a strange, hushed, forbidding silence that was broken only once and then for only the briefest moment by the mournful wail of a lonely, far-away coyote.

Lights gleamed brightly in the windows of the stores which lined both sides of Lodeville's only street. In the office of the express company a man pored over his ledgers at a corner desk. He tilted back the warped shade of the old lamp that stood on his desk, frowned and brought the lamp closer in order to get the full benefit of the flickering light.

The street itself was deserted. Loud, liquor-thickened voices arose at the crowded bar at the Golden Nugget saloon far down the street. Suddenly shadowy figures stepped out of nearby darkened doorways, glanced up and down the street, then raced toward the express office.

The man at the desk looked up in surprise when they burst in. He slammed the ledgers shut, pushed his chair back from the desk and got to his feet. He opened his mouth to protest against their intrusion when a gun flashed and flamed in the hand of a man standing in the doorway. The express agent fell across the desk. He raised himself slowly, laboriously, when the gun roared a second time. He shuddered, sagged and crumpled up on the floor behind the desk.

The shadowy figures bounded forward. They went at once to a cabinet in a far corner of the office. The doors were thrown open and a heavy box was dragged out. Gun butts smashed the lock of the box. The lid was raised and pushed back and eager hands plunged into the box and quickly emptied it.

Two mounted men leading a string of horses whirled up to the door. The intruders dashed out and leaped into their saddles. The last man to leave the office halted momentarily in the doorway, wheeled and whipped out his gun and fired. The bullet shattered the lamp and plunged the office into darkness. He ran to the curb and vaulted into his saddle.

The clatter of pounding hoofs echoed down the street. A man appeared in a dimly lighted doorway and shouted to the fleeing horsemen. One of them pulled up, whirled his horse around and fired twice. The man fell backwards in the doorway. The horseman wheeled, spurred his mount and galloped away after his companions.

Presently the clatter of hoofs died out. The street was silent again, ominously hushed, save for the occasional outbursts of laughter from the Golden Nugget.

THE following day two men sat in the street-floor office of Judge Ranse Avery. Both frowned darkly in thought. Neither seemed to notice the noise in the street outside, so completely engrossed were they.

Though it was noon there was little light in the office for a faded old blind which hung over the single window was drawn full length.

Shadows darted lightly over the ceiling and walls and formed distorted and fantastically-shaped figures which cavorted about madly. Presently a ray of sunlight sifted into the room through a widening gap at the top of the blind. The frolicking shadows subsided. The bright ray danced spiritedly over the desk toward the rear of the office and over the face and head of the man who sat quietly behind it.

The light revealed a lean, age-lined face, one which reflected strength and character and determination; it revealed too that the man's hair was gray and that it was thin-

ning. He looked up slowly and studied the big man who sat on the opposite side of the desk; waited patiently for him to speak. Presently the big man stirred. He shifted awkwardly in his chair, looked up and met the Judge's eyes. He shook his head soberly.

"Pore ol' Pop," he began. "Never done nuthin' to nob'dy yet them murderin' hellions had to kill 'im." His eyes grew hard and his voice thickened. "Why'n hell didn't they just take them damned bags o' gold dust an' let Pop alone?"

The Judge made no answer.

"'Course," the big man continued, "everybody in Lodeville knew that Pop wasn't th' kind to let 'nybody take anythin' belongin' to th' company without puttin' up a fight for it. Mebbe he made a try for his gun so they plugged 'im."

Surprise showed in the Judge's face.

"I understood you to say he was unarmed, Lee," he said.

"I meant he wasn't wearin' his gun. It was in th' desk drawer, near enough for him t' reach if he got th' chance to."

"I see. What about Molly?"

The Sheriff frowned again.

"Soon's I heard about it," he replied, "I went over t' see her. She just stood there while I was tellin' her an' never said a word. I can still see her, Judge, lookin' at me with eyes that didn't even see me. Pore kid, I kinda wish it was me 'stead o' ol' Pop."

He looked down at the silver star that adorned his short front. He studied it for a moment, frowned and shook his head again.

"Hell uv a fine sheriff I am," he muttered.

He climbed stiffly to his feet. He shifted his holster to his right hip, turned slowly and strolled to the window. He raised the blind and flooded the office with bright sunshine. He blinked in the light, then he stared out at the street. Men sauntered by, glanced at him and nodded and went on. Mounted men astride wiry, fleet-footed cow ponies which trotted gingerly along the rutted street caught sight of him framed in the window. They nodded to him too as they rode past. The gray-haired man behind the desk sat up in his chair.

"Lee," he called.

The big man turned.

"Yeah?"

"It's strange, isn't it," the Judge began, "that the Ranger we've been promised hasn't appeared yet?"

Lee Simms pondered a moment, then he shrugged his broad shoulders.

"Oh, I dunno," he answered presently. "No tellin' just why he ain't showed up yet. He mighta got tied up somewhere's or mebbe Cap'n Daniels changed his mind 'bout sendin' 'im."

Judge Avery shook his head.

"Oh, no, Lee," he said quickly, reassuringly. "Daniels wouldn't do anything like that."

"S'ppose not, bein' that you an' him's such old friends. Wa-al, what happens when th' Ranger does show up?"

"Then there'll be two good men to enforce the law in Lodeville," the Judge replied.

Simms scowled darkly.

"That's fine," he retorted. "Two uv us against a hull gang! What'll we be able t' do 'gainst that many? If it was a hull comp'ny o' Rangers that was comin', wa-al now, that'd be somethin'. But two uv us," he shook his head doggedly, "we ain't gonna git very far."

The Judge shifted himself in his chair.

"You read the letter I wrote to Captain Daniels," he pointed out.

The Sheriff gestured impatiently.

"'Course I read it. An' he sends us one Ranger," he said bitterly.

"He probably figures that we need only one Ranger," the Judge answered.

Simms' eyes flashed.

"Huh!" he said scornfully. "Shows what he knows 'bout Lodeville an' what we're up against here!"

"Daniels knows his business, Lee," the Judge asserted. "His reputation for law enforcement speaks for itself. Anyway, he's sending us one of his best men. . . man named Jenkins . . . er . . . Smith Jenkins."

"Jenkins?" the Sheriff repeated.

"Yes. Ever hear of him?"

"Nope."

"I made some inquiries about him," the Judge said briefly, "when I was in Cheyenne."

"Uh-huh, an' what did you find out 'bout 'im?"

"He's capable and resourceful," was the reply.

"Wa-al, I still wish it was more'n one man they were sendin'," Simms said doggedly.

Judge Avery laughed lightly.

CHAPTER II

THE mid-day stage whirled around the corner in a cloud of dust, rumbled down the street and pulled up with a screeching of brakes in front of Judge Avery's office. The lean, grizzled man on the driver's seat looped the reins around the iron brake handle, jumped down and strode briskly into the office.

Judge Avery was seated at his desk when the driver entered while Lee Simms was perched upon the edge of the desk. Both looked up when they heard the door open. Simms got to his feet.

"Lookin' for me, Dave?" he asked.

The grizzled man nodded. He closed the door behind him and trudged forward. He halted in front of the desk and shoved his dust-caked hat back from his eyes.

"Howdy, Judge," he began. He turned to Simms. "Sheriff, how'd yuh like t' ride 'long with me say as far's th' Pass?"

"Why? What yuh got aboard?"

"Dust," Dave answered simply.

"H'm," the Sheriff muttered. "'Nother shipment from th' mine, eh?"

Dave nodded again.

"Uh-huh," he replied. "An' a big one, too. With Pop gone, reckon th' best thing I can do is ride it over to Red River an' turn it over to th' bank."

"How come they didn't send a couple o' guards along with yuh?" the Sheriff demanded.

"Oh, they wanted to, awright," Dave said quickly, "on'y . . . . ."

"On'y what?"

The stage driver coughed behind a gnarled hand. The result of his effort was a disappointment for it was more like a wheeze than a genuine cough. The Sheriff frowned and eyed him suspiciously. Dave tried it a second time. He coughed so hard and so loud that it left him teary-eyed and breathless and limp. He blinked and gulped before he finally got his breath back.

"Wa-al?" Simms demanded impatiently. "On'y what?"

"I tol' 'em they wasn't needed."

"Oh, yeah?"

Dave grinned suddenly, a fleeting, toothless grin that lit up his whole face.

"I told 'em you'd be glad t' ride shotgun for me," he answered calmly.

The frown on the Sheriff's face became a scowl.

"Why, yuh ornery ol' polecat," he blurted out. "Yuh think I got nuthin' else t' do but nursemaid you an' that busted-down stage o' yourn?"

Dave shrugged his shoulder.

"'Course, if yuh'd rather send one o yo' depities along," he said, "I reckon it'll be all th' same t' me. If I git held up it won't be no skin offa my nose."

Simms snorted loudly.

"Deputies, eh? Huh! I fired both o' them mangey critters last night. Them two fellers were scared o' their own shadows."

"Git y'self a couple o' others."

The Sheriff's lip thinned.

"That s'pposed t' be funny? I cain't even scare up a posse when I need one," he retorted. He hitched up his belt. "C'mon. If I gotta go, I might's well go now an' git it over with."

Dave caught the Judge's eye and winked. The Judge smiled gravely. Dave turned on his heel and trudged toward the door. He halted there presently and looked back over his shoulder.

"Soon's yuh're ready, Sheriff," he said.

He opened the door and marched out. Simms settled his hat on his head. He turned briefly to the Judge.

"Reckon I'd better go right on t' Red River," he said, "'stead o' leavin' him at th' Pass. Then I'll know nuthin's happened t' that load o' dust he's got aboard."

He stalked out of the office. Dave had already mounted to his seat. Simms climbed up beside him. The driver handed him a shotgun. The Sheriff laid it across his knees. Dave gathered up the reins, released the brakes and yelled to the horses.

The stage rumbled away and gathering speed, headed for the open country and the hills beyond.

"That other feller that got plugged," Dave began presently. "He git hurt bad?"

"In th' shoulder," the Sheriff replied.

"Uh-huh."

They settled back on the wide seat.

"That gang's gittin' tougher t' handle all th' time," Dave began again shortly. "If yuh didn't know who they was that'd be bad 'nuff. But this way . . . knowin' who th' critters are an' where they hang out but not bein' able t' do 'nythin' 'bout 'em . . . wa-al, that's plumb discouragin'."

The Sheriff made no answer. The subject was a sore point with him and he

frowned with annoyance and glared at the road ahead. It was probably an hour later when they sighted the rough summits of the Pass. Simms' hand tightened around the barrel of the rifle.

Chenango Pass . . . that dreaded passageway between Lodeville and Red River . . . named for the ruthless Indians who had once taken possession of it and used it as a focal point in a vain effort to stem the onrushing tide of settlers who surged westward in ever-increasing numbers in their quest for the promised land. But finally, hemmed in on all sides by the white men, the Indians abandoned it and stole away. Eventually, the name of Chenange passed into history. Eventually too, the passageway was simply referred to as the 'Pass'.

BUT the Pass did not remain untenanted. White outlaws with prices upon their heads followed hard upon the outgoing Indians' heels and once again the Pass became the operating point for those who preyed upon their fellows. The rough terrain, so easily defended against those who sought to dislodge them, lent itself to the outlaws' purposes. The stage that plied between the towns suffered regularly . . . so much so that it became both unprofitable and dangerous to continue its operation. Then too, emboldened by their successes, the outlaws sallied forth and raided the nearby towns. Pursuit usually ended at the foot of the hills or at the entrance to the Pass for to attempt to penetrate either of them meant but one thing . . . death to the pursuers.

A rocky, rutted road wound upward to the Pass and through it. On both sides of the narrow road, huge, bald-faced, sun-bleached boulders reared their heads. It was difficult going now and Dave permitted his horses to slacken their pace. The coach jounced from side to side as the big wheels rolled over half-buried rocks and slid off the sheer sides of others. Then suddenly a horseman rode out from behind a boulder, wheeled and halted in the road ahead.

"Thar yuh are," Dave muttered. "Looks like we got comp'ny."

Simms shoved the shotgun aside. His hand dropped to the butt of his Colt.

"Keep goin'," he said curtly. "I'll 'tend to that feller m'self."

The stage went on, then, as they watched through narrowed eyes, three more horsemen appeared and filled the roadway. Dave looked quickly at the Sheriff, a question in his eyes. Simms whipped out his gun.

"Ride 'em down," he snapped.

Dave lashed the horses with the loose ends of the reins. They plunged forward. One of the horsemen fired and a bullet ploughed into the wide seat, into a tiny space between Simms and the driver. The latter cursed angrily. The Sheriff's gun suddenly roared twice in reply.

Then the careening stage was upon the advancing horsemen who had evidently expected it to halt. Too late they realized that it was Simms' intention to ride them down. Frantically they jerked their horses back out of the road, pulled them back viciously on their haunches.

One of the horses screamed in terror as the coach hurtled by in a cloud of dust, reared up on its hind legs and crashed over backwards. Guns roared and smoke obscured everything. Then suddenly they were in the clear again, plunging wildly down the rocky road with the jagged summits of the Pass and the white-faced boulders falling away swiftly behind them.

Dave glanced sharply at the Sheriff. Simms lay back on the wide seat. He was hatless and he was panting heavily. There was a bloody smear across his face. Suddenly, as the stage lurched, he half arose to his feet. He swayed a bit, lost his balance and toppled forward between the threshing horses. Dave lunged for him but missed him by inches.

He heard shouts behind him, then the clatter of pounding, pursuing hoofs. Frantically he lashed the horses, lashed them again and again. Bullets whined by overhead and Dave bent lower. Then he spied a horseman loping toward him and as the rider came closer he saw the man spur forward at an increased pace. Dave caught sight of a raised Colt, then the horseman was abreast of him and past him.

Minutes later when the stage whirled around a sharp curve Dave stood up for a moment and looked back. In the rising haze of smoke and dust he saw the stranger ride toward the onrushing horsemen, saw flame burst from the lone rider's gun and saw with widening eyes two of the men tumble out of their saddles. Then, as the road ahead straightened out and dipped down sharply, he lost sight of the surviving pursuer and the stranger.

CHAPTER III

IT WAS early evening when a lone horseman, a black clad man astride a big black horse, loped into Lodeville. At a word from his rider, the big horse slackened his pace to a trot. Loud laughter and drink-thickened voices attracted the horseman's attention to the brightly-lighted Golden Nugget. He pulled up in front of the saloon, dismounted and tied up the black at the hitching rail.

Three men sauntered out and halted idly in the open doorway. They looked up, eyed the tall, black clad man as he strode toward the door. Their eyes swept over him, lingered longest over the brace of heavy black Colts which hung low against his muscular thighs. They moved aside a bit and exchanged significant glances among themselves as he came abreast of them. He glanced at them, stepped past them and halted briefly, just inside the doorway. He hooked his thumbs in his gun belt and looked about curiously.

A curtain of cigar and cigarette smoke hung like a pall over the place while a strong, musty smell of stale beer and malt assailed him.

The saloon, he had already noted, was well crowded. There was little room at the bar to the left; less room at the tables to the right. Eyes turned in his direction, curiously at first, then they lingered appraisingly, but he paid no attention to them. He strode to the bar. Two men standing there halted their conversation and glanced at him and moved away a bit and made room for him.

The barkeeper, a pudgy, sweaty man with watery eyes and a red, bulbous nose, wiped the bar with a wet towel and slung it away carelessly. It dropped over the dripping spigot of a beer barrel. The barkeeper looked up.

"What'll it be, stranger?"

"Whiskey."

"Whiskey comin' up," the barkeeper droned.

A half filled bottle slid along the damp, glistening surface of the bar. A big hand shot out, collared the bottle and drew it in. The black clad man glanced at it, frowned when he noticed that the label had been torn off, held the bottle to his nose for a moment and finally set it down again. The barkeeper placed a glass in front of him, turned but halted again almost immediately and eyed him questioningly.

"S'matter, Mister?" he asked.

"What's this s'pposed t' be?"

"What's it look like?"

"Cain't tell much from its looks. Shore smells a heap like anythin' but what I asked for," was the reply. "Gimme somethin' else."

The barkeeper frowned. He caught up the bottle, turned and trudged away. He returned presently with another bottle, uncorked it and set it down upon the bar. The black clad man reached for it and lifted it to his nose. He sniffed it, grunted and poured himself a drink and put down the bottle. He raised his glass, drained it and put it down. He dug in his pocket for a coin, produced one and dropped it on the bar. He turned around, leaned back, his elbows resting on the edge of the bar.

At a corner table four men were seated. One of them stopped talking and looked sharply at the black clad man. He was a big, heavily-built man with a full, jowled face. One of his companions, a younger man with quick, shifty eyes, noted his interest in the stranger.

"S'matter?"

"Huh? Oh. Any o' you fellers know that hombre? Th' one in black, leanin' against th' bar?"

The three turned slowly in their chairs. They looked sharply at the black clad man. They swung around again presently.

"Wa-al?"

The man with the shifty eyes shook his head and settled back in his chair.

"How 'bout it, Tex? Yuh know 'im?"

A tall, rangey man with pale blue eyes set in a sun-bronzed face shook his head.

"Ain't never seen 'im b'fore that ah know uv," he drawled in reply. "Leastways, not that ah can r'member."

The gray haired man frowned.

"You fellers are a big help, awright," he said gruffly. "Reco'nize that hombre, Bull?"

The fourth man, a short, heavy-set man with a thick, red neck and beady eyes turned and looked a second time.

"Dunno, Benton," he answered presently. "There's somethin' f'miliar 'bout 'im but I cain't put m' finger on it. Mebbe it'll come t' me by'n by."

GREG BENTON frowned again. It was evident that he considered it

necessary that he should know everyone in Lodeville. His failure to place the stranger and the failure of his men to recognize the man annoyed him. That an annoyance became an obsession with him until he disposed of it became even more apparent for he continued to study the black clad man with greater interest than before.

"Rigged out in black fr'm top t' bottom," he mused, "an' totin' two guns."

"Uh-huh," Tex added in his soft drawl, "an' them holsters o' his are tied down real bus'ness-like, too."

"If yuh should ask me," the shifty eyed man remarked, "that there hombre's bad medicine."

Someone scoffed.

"Yuh can allus spot a real gun thrower," the shifty eyed man said doggedly, "an' a feller that's tryin' t' look like one. There's somethin' about th' real kind that th' other kind ain't got. This hombre's got a-plenty."

A slim, dust covered youth with a flushed face burst into the saloon. He halted briefly, scanned the crowded room, caught sight of the four men at the corner table and made his way toward them. The shifty eyed man nudged Greg Benton. The latter turned in his chair and frowned. The youth halted beside him.

"Where'n hell yuh been all this time?" Greg demanded.

The youth turned slightly, spied a vacant chair close by, dragged it over and sat down.

"How'd yuh make out?" Greg demanded presently.

The youth shook his head.

"We didn't," he answered simply.

The frown on Greg Benton's face became a dark scowl.

"What happened?" he asked gruffly.

The youth noticed a half filled glass of whiskey in front of Tex. He leaned over the table, caught up the glass and drained it at a single swallow, shoved it aside and sat down again.

"Plenty happened," he said. "Jerry an' Mike got plugged. Dunno what b'came o' Rusty."

"Go on."

"We got th' Sheriff."

Greg Benton's eyes blazed.

"Why, yuh damn fool!" he snarled. "Didn't I tell yuh no more gunplay till Pop's killin' dies down?"

"We didn't aim t' have 'ny," the youth answered coldly. "Th' Sheriff was ridin' shotgun for Dave. I fired once, a warnin' shot, but 'stead o' pullin' up, they come pilin' into us like all hell. It musta been th' Sheriff's idea t' ride us down."

"Wa-al?"

"We just about managed t' git outta th' way o' th' stage. Rusty's horse went over backwards an' pinned Rusty under 'im. We got th' Sheriff an' chased th' stage but some galoot on a big roan come along an' got Jerry an' Mike."

"How'd you git away?"

The youth smiled fleetingly.

"For once that filly o' mine ran. I hid out till it got dark an' headed here," he concluded. "Figgered you an' th' boys'd prob'bly be in town."

Greg's face was a cold mask.

"Th' feller on th' roan," he began. "Ever see 'im b'fore?"

"Nope."

Greg climbed heavily to his feet.

"Let's git outta here. C'mon," he said curtly. "All uv yuh."

The others got to their feet. The youth suddenly clutched Gregg's arm.

"There he is!" he said excitedly. "Th' feller standin' in th' doorway!"

Framed in the doorway of the saloon was a tall, lean, bronzed man. The black clad man turned slowly and looked at him. For a moment their eyes met. If a flash of recognition passed between them, neither one gave any outward indication of it. Both turned away. Greg stared at the bronzed man for a moment.

"Tex," he said quickly. "You an' Bull git outta here 'head uv us. Git th' horses an' wait for us up th' street a-ways. Go 'head."

TEX and Bull stepped around them and strode toward the door.

"What 'bout me?" the shifty eyed man asked.

"You git outta here, too, Reno," Greg ordered. "Wait outside th' door. If we have 'ny trouble with this galoot, you'll be b'hind him. Savvy?"

"Shore."

Reno shifted his holster and trudged away. The tall man in the doorway glanced at Tex and Bull as they came abreast of him and moved aside to permit them to pass. They looked at him sharply and stalked out. Reno reached the door a moment or two later, eyed the tall man fleetingly and stepped outside.

Greg took a hitch in his belt.

"Let's go," he said briefly.

The youth drew a deep breath. He squared his shoulders and started forward. Greg's arm shot out. He caught the youth by the wrist and halted him.

"Don't look at 'im," Greg ordered in a low tone, "an, don't open yo' mouth, understan'? I'll handle everythin'."

Together they marched toward the door. The tall man glanced at them. They brushed past him and reached the threshold.

"Hold on."

They froze in their tracks. Slowly Greg Benton turned.

"You, young feller."

The youth turned slowly. His face was deathly white. The muscles in his jaws twitched nervously.

"You Curt Benton?"

Greg frowned.

"S'pposin' he is?" he rasped.

"Then he's under arrest," the bronzed man said quietly.

Greg's eyes blazed.

"Like hell he is," he said thickly.

His hand streaked toward his holster. The tall man swung. His fist collided with Greg's jaw. Greg went over backwards. Curt backed away. His gun leaped into his hand. He fired from the hip but the bullet failed to find its mark for the bronzed man whirled sideways and dove headlong at him in a jolting flying tackle. Curt gasped painfully. His gun flew out of his hand. He went down with a resounding thud.

A slim, shifty eyed man, gun in hand, burst into the saloon. He stumbled and almost fell over the sprawled figure of Greg Benton, straightened up and stared hard at him. He frowned and looked up sharply at the tall man who was climbing to his feet above the outstretched form of Curt Benton. Reno's eyes glinted. His gun snapped up.

Somewhere along the bar a heavy Colt flamed and thundered. Reno gulped. A grimace of pain spread over his face. He dropped his gun. It fell at his feet and he stared at it curiously, strangely, and swayed on unsteady, buckling legs. He raised his head slowly. He sagged suddenly and pitched forward on his face and rolled over. His left leg twitched fleetingly, then he lay still. The black-clad man lowered a smoking Colt.

The bronzed man straightened up. He looked down at Curt for a moment but the youth did not move. He glanced idly at Greg Benton, turned slowly, caught the eye of the black clad man at the bar.

"I'm obliged t' yuh, Marshall," he said briefly.

The black clad man nodded. The tall man kicked Reno's gun out of the way, sent Curt's gun skidding across the floor with a vicious kick, bent over Greg Benton and hauled him to his feet. Greg swayed unsteadily. When he raised his head those near him noted that his eyes were glassy. There was a curious red lump on the side of his jaw. A trickle of blood surged out of a corner of his mouth and ran down his chin. He shook his head in an effort to clear it. He swayed again for an instant but braced himself on widespread legs and glared.

"Listen t' me, Benton," the bronzed man said clearly. "Th' law's come t' Lodeville an' it's come t' stay. Understan'? Yo' son killed th' Sheriff an' he's gonna pay for what he done. Next one I'll be lookin' for'll be you, so if yuh're as smart's yun think yuh are, steer clear o' this town an' me. Now send them hellions o' yourn back in here an 'have 'em tote this mangey critter away. I aim t' clean up Lodeville, not litter it up. Git outta here."

HIS arm shot out. He jerked Greg's gun out of its holster and shoved it into his own belt. Greg turned slowly, looked back over his shoulder at the sprawled body of Reno, then at the limp figure of his son, straightened up and trudged out. A murmur ran through the crowded saloon. The tall man swung around.

"Now then, you men," he began loudly. A hush settled over the place. "I'm a Ranger. M' name's Jenkins. I don't s'ppose any o' yuh know me so pay attention t' what I gotta say. I've been sent here t' make this hell-hole a fit place for decent folks t' live in. If any o' yuh got 'ny contr'ry ideas, I'm advisin' yuh t' hit th' trail pronto for other parts while there's still time. Those uv yuh that aim t' stay on better r'member one thing. I'm runnin' this town an' I aim t' keep right on runnin' it till I figger it can run itself. That clear?"

There was no answer. There was however a faint cough at a far corner of the

saloon. Another man cleared his throat. When someone turned and glared at him, he colored and lowered his eyes.

"There's just one more thing," the Ranger continued. "We gotta have a new sheriff. Anybody got th' guts t' take th' job?"

No one moved. Jenkins smiled coldly.

"Don't everybody speak up at one time," he said scornfully. He waited a moment more. "Wa-al?" He turned and looked at the men at the bar, but they turned their heads. His eyes halted on the black clad man, "How 'bout it, Marshall? I know you ain't a-scared uv anythin'. Yuh willin' t' step over t' th' side o' th' law for a change?"

The black clad man grinned.

"Dunno, Jenkins," he answered. "Still, if yuh want me to, reckon I'm 'willin' t' have a whirl at bein' a lawman."

"Good."

"Not s' fast. If I take th' job, it's gotta be un'erstood that I'm th' boss an' that I c'n run things 'ccordin' t' m' own way o' thinkin'. If that ain't agree'ble to yuh, reckon yuh'd better git someb'dy else for th' job."

The Ranger was silent for a moment. He looked up again presently.

"Awright, Marshall,' 'he said in a tone of finality. "You win. Yuh're th' new Sheriff o' Lodeville an' th' boss." He turned and glanced at Curt Benton who was now sitting up and feeling tenderly of his stomach. "There's yo' first pris'ner. Reckon yuh'd better take 'im away."

CHAPTER IV

MARSHALL shifted himself heavily in his chair and looked out at the silent and darkened street. He judged it was midnight, although it seemed like an eternity since the episode in the Golden Nugget, and cursed inwardly. Here he was, losing his good sleep while Jenkins and the rest of the town enjoyed theirs.

He propped his feet up on the edge of the desk and sank back in the chair. He lowered his feet presently and sat upright and listened intently for a moment, mumbled something under his breath and rose stiffly. He trudged to the door at the rear of the office and listened there. After a minute he opened the door and looked in at his prisoner.

Curt Benton was sitting on the edge of a rickety old cot. He looked up when he heard the door open.

"Just wanted yuh t' know I'm still around," Marshall said casually.

Curt gave him a cold stare and looked away. Marshall shrugged his shoulder, closed the door and went back to his chair.

There was no jailhouse in Lodeville; nothing that even faintly resembled one. He had made that rather startling discovery upon asking a passing townsman to direct him to it. It was only after a conference with Judge Avery that a temporary lock-up was provided. There was an empty storeroom directly behind the Judge's office and connected to it and Marshall had snapped up his offer to use it until a more suitable location was provided.

It was only after he had stepped into the storeroom and looked it over that he began to doubt its worth even as a temporary lock-up. Its walls were flimsy and a determined prisoner would have little difficulty in effecting a jail-break. However, there was nothing he could do but make the most of it and hope for the best.

There was no lock on the door between the office and the storeroom and to guard against a sudden attack by the prisoner, should the latter attempt one, Marshall dragged a spare chair over to the door, tilted it and jammed it hard under the door knob. He eyed his handiwork critically for a moment, tested it, shook his head and returned to his own chair.

He stifled a yawn and stretched himself.

"Doggone it," he mumbled. "How I ever let that Smith Jenkins talk me inter takin' this damn fool job is somethin' I'll never un'erstand. Reckon I musta been plumb loco."

He looked across the darkened room and frowned. Rather than offer himself as a target to some hidden marksman who might be waiting for an opportunity to dispose of him, Marshall had removed the lamp from the desk and carried it into the storeroom. In the darkness he felt more secure.

He arose presently and sauntered forward to the window. The street was deserted and darkened from one end to the other. The frown deepened on his face.

"Deader'n hell," he muttered. "It shore looks like th' comin' uv th' law musta scared ev'rybody inter turnin' in early. Never saw a place so dark an' quiet, not even a grave yard."

He studied the darkened doorways across the street, probed and searched every shadow with keen eyes until he was completely satisfied that there were no humans concealed within them. He realized that Greg Benton would not permit his son to languish in jail for any length of time without making some sort of attempt to effect his escape.

The strange, hushed silence began to irk him. The darkness too began to play upon his imagination.

"I'll be plumb s'prised if Benton don't make a try t'night," he muttered shortly. He was silent in thought for a moment. "Wonder if they will?"

Somewhere in that vast darkness outside a dog barked. Marshall stiffened. He thought he detected something unreal in the bark. Instantly he decided that it was a signal of some kind. He looked out again, cautiously at first, then a bit bolder, and scanned the street swiftly, but he saw nothing to substantiate his hastily formed conclusion. Perhaps it was just his imagination. Perhaps it really was a dog. After a minute he relaxed and trudged back to the chair behind the Judge's desk. He sat down again and stretched his long legs.

A RIFLE shot broke the stillness of the night. A bullet shattered the window pane with a heart-stopping crash and ploughed into the desk. Marshall bounded out of the chair and raced along the wall to the window. He whipped out his guns and knelt down in the darkness and looked out. There was no one in the street.

He scowled with annoyance and snapped an aimless shot hoping to draw another in reply so that he could trace it back to its source. A minute passed, then a rifle cracked and a bullet buried itself in the window frame. The flash that followed the shot came from the flat rooftop of a darkened building directly across the street. Marshall grunted with satisfaction.

"Awright, Mister," he gritted. "Long's I know where yuh are, reckon that kinda evens things up. Wa-al, here goes."

He fired once, then a second time. Hardly had the echo of his shots died away when the rifleman fired again. Then others joined in and added the crashing thunder of their fire. Bullets sprayed the window and the front door of the building and Marshall sprawled hastily on the floor and crawled to the other side of the window. A moment later a bullet whined through the pane-less window and buried itself in the wall just beyond.

"H'm," Marshall mused. "That one had m' name on it, awright. Good thing I got outta there when I did. Reckon I'm gonna hafta keep movin' around t' spoil them fellers' aim."

He stole a fleeting look across the street, spied a shadow on the rooftop and decided that it was man-made and ripped two shots into it. He squinted through the gun smoke and studied it but when the shadow lengthened he cursed aloud.

"Doggone that Jenkins," he mumbled. "Wonder where'n hell he is? If he ain't deaf or dead all this gun blastin' oughta bring 'im here on the run."

A bullet struck and splintered the street door and Marshall glowered. He fired twice in the general direction of the roof, huddled in the space between the window and the door and reloaded his guns. Bullets ploughed into the splintered door with annoying regularity. The riflemen had evidently shifted their aim.

"Polecats," he said bitterly. "Busted th' window an' now they're doin' th' same to th' door."

A volley of shots riddled the door, shattered and wafted away a good-sized panel at the bottom of the door. Moonlight streamed into the office through the opening and bright rays danced lightly over the floor and walls. Marshall moved away hurriedly. He had no desire to offer himself as a spot-lighted target.

He made his way over to the window again, snapped a couple of shots and withdrew quickly. There was no answering blast of gunfire. A minute passed, then two, three, still there was no reply from the roof. Marshall, huddling as before between the window and the door, scowled and wondered at the sudden silence.

He turned presently to the window again, levelled both of his Colts and ripped half a dozen lightning shots along the ledge of the roof. There was no answer. Then with great suddenness he bounded to his feet and raced to the connecting door, kicked the tilted chair out of the way and burst into the storeroom. He halted just inside the lamp-lit room and stared hard. Curt Benton was gone. In the wall behind the cot was a great, yawning gap. Half a dozen boards had been pried loose and ripped out.

He cursed loudly and trudged into the bullet-riddled office. What a fool he was! What a childish plot he had fallen for!

While the hidden riflemen had occupied his attention and filled the night air with the roar of gunfire, Curt or someone on the outside had pried loose the boards and effected his escape. When they were satisfied that he had had enough time in which to make his escape, the riflemen had simply ceased their fire and withdrawn.

Marshall looked up quickly when he heard the sound of running feet outside. He strode at once to the window and looked out. Two figures came pounding down the street. He recognized the taller one as Jenkins. He threw open the door. Judge Avery, a shotgun clutched tightly in his hands, panted up at the heels of the Ranger.

"C'mon in," Marshall said briefly.

THE two men stepped inside. The Judge looked about him quickly.

"What happened?" Jenkins demanded.

Marshall frowned in the darkness.

"Cain't yuh guess? Benton come after his son," he answered. "That's all."

"An' yuh fought 'em off, eh?"

Marshall's lip curled.

"Fought 'em off hell," he retorted. "They put on 'n act for me, blastin' away like they were gittin' ready t' rush th' place. 'Stead o' gittin' wise to it when they didn't rush me, I kept firin' back an' thinkin' I was doin' awright. Anyway, while it was goin' on, someb'dy got around t' th' back and cut a chunk outta th' storeroom wall an' helped Curt git away. When they figgered that Curt was out, they just quit shootin' an' hightailed it."

The Ranger turned slowly. A frown clouded his face.

"Damn it," he muttered, half aloud.

"That's puttin' it pretty mild," Marshall said. "What we'd better do an' do it pronto is figger out how we c'n git young Benton back here b'fore we git laughed outta town."

The Judge had gone to the storeroom while they were talking and now he returned with the lamp and placed it on the desk.

"But what can you do?" he asked. "After all, there are only two of you. As I told Jenkins, neither of you are expected to perform miracles. All we want here is a little law and order."

Marshall grunted. He took a hitch in his belt.

"Judge, where'bouts is th' Benton place?" he asked.

"Oh, about ten miles west of here," Judge Avery replied. He eyed Marshall sharply for a moment. "Why do you ask?"

The black clad man avoided his eyes.

"I was just wonderin'," he said. He settled his hat on his head. "I'll see you fellers later."

He turned toward the door. The Ranger looked up.

"Got somethin' in mind?" he asked.

Marshall grinned.

"Nope. Just goin' for a ride," he answered lightly. "I allus go for a ride b'fore breakfast. Seems t' help m' appetite."

"I'll keep yuh comp'ny," Jenkins said briefly.

Marshall shook his head.

"Thanks, but I allus like t' ride by m'self," he said quietly.

The Ranger shrugged his shoulder. The black clad man nodded to them and trudged out. When his footsteps had faded out, the Judge turned slowly and strolled to his desk. He seated himself. Jenkins perched himself on the edge of the desk. Presently they heard the rhythmic clatter of hoofs. It swelled fleetingly then it faded out.

"He's a strange man," the Judge mused.

The Ranger nodded.

"Uh-huh. 'Less I miss m' guess, th' Bentons are gonna find that out too," he said grimly.

CHAPTER V

THE horseman loped out of the blackness of the night, topped a rise and jerked his mount to a halt. Below him in a saucer of a valley was a sprawling ranch-house now bathed in darkness and black shadows. Beyond the house were several other buildings, broad hipped barns and a low, long bunkhouse. Opposite the bunkhouse, probably some thirty or forty feet away, was the corral. The smooth, worn bars of the corral gate shone white in the moonlight.

He dismounted, snatched a lariat from his saddle horn, patted the sleek, gleaming neck of his horse and strode away.

He avoided the trail that dipped down into the valley and made his way down a

grassy incline dotted with brush and juniper. Minutes later he reached the valley floor. He swung wide of the house, reached the first of the other buildings, a huge old barn, and kept close to it, his black costume blending perfectly with the solid black shadows thrown off by the structure. He emerged into the light again presently between the hulking barn and the low, squat bunkhouse.

In front of the bunkhouse stood a heavy, high-wheeled farm wagon. He quickly looped one end of the lariat around the bunkhouse doorknob, strode to the wagon, passed the rope through the spokes of one of the big wheels and backed away from it, playing out the line as he retraced his steps to the door. He snapped the rope taut, looped another knot over the knob and jerked it tight. He tested the line, nodded to himself and trudged toward the house.

He halted in front of it presently and looked up at it, considering. There were several windows within climbing distance of the ground but he swung away toward the side of the house, chose a window and raised it a bit slowly and noiselessly. He paused a moment and listened, then he raised it as high as he could. He chinned himself up and slid over the sill and stepped into the room.

At first the darkness overwhelmed him. He stood still for a minute or two, motionless, in the darkness until his eyes grew accustomed to it. There was a heavy table in the middle of the room and he kept close to it and guided himself around it, treading on tip-toe past several chairs, then around a tall cabinet, until he finally reached a small hallway. He spied a closed door just beyond him and headed for it, reached it and halted there and listened. He tried the knob and it turned easily and yielded. He opened the door and listened. He heard deep, heavy breathing, frowned and promptly closed the door.

"Benton," he muttered to himself.

There was another door just a few feet away and he made his way forward to it, halted there and listened as before. He turned the knob gently and opened the door. Moonlight streamed into the room through an opened window. Noiselessly he stepped inside the room and tiptoed toward the bed. He bent over the figure on the bed and studied the face of the sleeper. It was that of a man. His eyes gleamed suddenly with satisfaction. It was Curt Benton.

He straightened up, bumped into a chair and froze in his tracks. The outstretched figure on the bed sat upright.

"Who . . . who's there?"

An arm arose in the shadows beside the bed. A gun butt thudded against Curt's head. He grunted and stiffened for a moment, then he fell back. Swiftly the intruder holstered his gun and bent over him again and turned him over. Curt's hands were bound behind his back. A handkerchief was jammed into his mouth to prevent an outcry. The bed covers were thrown back, revealing the younger Benton clad in underwear. A grin swept over the black clad man's grim face. It fled almost instantly. He bent over Curt again and swung the unconscious youth over his shoulder.

Quietly he stepped into the hallway again, paused momentarily and listened, then he shifted his awkward burden and went on again. Carefully he made his way through the darkness and jerked himself to a halt when one of Curt's dangling legs collided with the back of a chair. But after a brief minute's wait he went forward again toward the window through which he had entered. He reached the window and lowered Curt and slid him halfway out, resting the unconscious youth's body on the sill. He slid his own leg over the sill and climbed out and dropped to the ground, then he slowly drew Curt out.

ONCE again he settled Curt over his shoulder. He turned and looked up at the silent house, then he trudged away. He avoided the trail as before, afraid that he might trip over or dislodge stones and send them rolling down and awaken the Benton household. He chose again the grassy incline and plodded uphill.

Minutes later he reached his horse. He lifted Curt into the saddle and swung up behind him, wheeled his mount and cantered away.

He turned once or twice and looked back but the darkened house and bunkhouse, still bathed in darkness and shadows, were silent. He jabbed his mount with his spurs and the big horse quickened his pace. Minutes later they disappeared into the night.

The veil of darkness was lifting when he sighted the town of Red River ahead of him. Already a faint, pinkish glow had

crept into the sky. Swiftly the shadows of night vanished and now as he watched, all things previously dimmed and obscured by darkness took shape and form.

The street was deserted and silent and even shadowy as he entered. He slowed his mount and jogged along, scanning the crudely printed signs on the darkened buildings on either side of the street.

He pulled up in front of a building which bore a sign, 'Sheriff's Office,' dismounted and lowered Curt Benton to the ground, and dragged him across the sidewalk to the door.

He pounded on the door with his fist. When he got no response, he yanked out one of his heavy Colts and hammered on the door with his gunbutt. Presently he heard an indistinct voice inside, then he heard someone move about within. The door was suddenly thrown open and a big, red-eyed man in an undershirt and pants appeared in the doorway.

"Wa-al?" the man demanded resentfully. "What's th' idea o' all th' noise this time o' night?"

"You th' Sheriff?"

The man glared wrathfully.

"What d'yuh think that there sign on th' winder means?" he retorted. His eyes swept over the tall, black clad man and halted, wideningly, on the underwear-clad man at his feet. He stared hard at young Benton for a moment, then he looked up sharply. "What's this?"

Marshall grinned easily.

"This critter is Curt Benton," he answered. "Mebbe yuh've heard tell o' his ol' man, Greg Benton? Anyway, this cuss busted out uv our cigar-box jail but I caught up with 'im again. Now I'm lookin' for a good place t' leave 'im. Mebbe yuh got some room in yo' jail that yuh ain't usin'?"

The man frowned.

"I'm th' Sheriff, Mister," he said coldly. "Not a hotel keeper. We don't rent out space here an' we don't go lookin' for customers. Where yuh from?"

"Lodeville."

The man's eyes opened wide. He was interested now.

"Oh, yeah? So yuh're th' feller that took over for Lee Simms, eh?"

Marshall nodded.

"Uh-huh. How'd you know 'bout Simms?" he asked.

"That Dave Barry . . . th' stage driver . . . tol' me 'bout Lee bein' killed by a couple o' mavericks yesti'd'y."

"I see. News shore travels fast 'round these parts, don't it? Anyway, this critter is th' one that killed Simms."

"Yuh don't say? Wa-al, that's diff'rent. 'Course yuh c'n leave 'im here. I'll be more'n glad t' look out for 'im."

"Thanks."

"That's awright. What'd yuh say yuh name is?"

"Marshall."

"Mine's Mullens. Wa-al, Marshall, s'ppose we make a deal o' this? I'll charge yuh a dollar a day for any uv yo' pris'ners that yuh wanna board out with me. Got a bran' new jail house here an' whatever I c'n take in 'll help pay for it. Now for this maverick, I'll make it fifty cents a day. I got somethin' uv a int'rest in him bein' that he killed Lee."

"Sounds reas'nable t' me."

"Then it's a go. S-ay, how are yuh at checkers? Good?"

Marshall laughed lightly.

"Dunno. Haven't played it much lately. Why?"

"Wa-al, Lee an' me uster play it every once in a while. Guess we were 'bout even. Anyway, we each put up five dollars, winner take all. How 'bout you takin over for 'im so's we c'n see who gits th' money?"

"Awright. First chance I git, I'll let yuh know."

"Good. Now just haul that feller inside. I'll take care o' him after that."

Marshall nodded. He got a firm grip on Curt's undershirt and dragged him inside.

"Yuh c'n leave 'im there."

"Thanks. Reckon I'd better git goin' now."

The Sheriff of Red River held out his hand. Marshall took it gravely.

"So long."

"So long, Marshall. Lemme know when yuh c'n come over, will yuh?"

"You bet."

Marshall turned on his heel, strode to the curb and vaulted into his saddle. He wheeled the black, nodded to the man in the doorway, jerked the reins and cantered away. The man looked after him for a minute and shook his head.

"Reckon I won't be seein' him again," he muttered. "Sheriffs don't live long in Lodeville."

He turned abruptly and closed the door behind him.

TWO hours later Marshall loped into Lodeville. The street, he quickly noted, was alive with activity. Horsemen riding by glanced at him as he came abreast of them and quickly looked away. Here and there along the street little groups of men looked up, nudged each other, when he rode past them and whispered among themselves. He pulled up in front of Judge Avery's office. When he dismounted Jenkins and the Judge were framed in the doorway. He looked over at them and grinned.

"You fellers still here?" he asked.

Neither of them answered. They eyed him quietly and moved away from the door to permit him to enter. He sauntered inside and kicked the door closed.

"Enjoy your ride?" the Judge asked trying to be very casual about it.

"Oh, it was awright, I s'ppose," Marshall answered.

"H'm," the judge said.

"Yuh musta covered a heap o' ground," Jenkins remarked. "Yuh were gone a long time."

"Reckon so."

Jenkins moistened his lips with his tongue.

"What'd yuh do with young Benton?" he asked.

Judge Avery looked up quickly. His eyes probed Marshall's face as he waited for the reply.

"Left 'im over at Red River," Marshall answered.

Jenkins and Judge Avery looked at each other.

"I'm kinda hungry. Reckon I'll go git me somethin' t' eat," Marshall said briefly. "How 'bout you fellers?"

"Not just yet," the Ranger answered.

"Then I'll prob'bly see yuh later," Marshall said.

He turned and strolled out. The Judge shook his head slowly. Jenkins glanced at him and grinned

"What's th' matter, Judge?" he asked.

Judge Avery drew a deep breath.

"Jenkins," he said clearly. "You're a master of understatement. You told me he was a good man for the job. I think he's a remarkable one!"

CHAPTER VI

MOLLY Lanning stopped brushing her hair. A tall, black clad man strode down the street, past her window. She pushed the curtain aside and watched him for a minute. Tall and lithe with the broad shoulders and narrow waist of an athlete, he was an eye-filling picture of a real man. Her eyes swept over him, down over the heavy black Colts which hung low against his thighs. That she had already heard about him was immediately obvious for she studied him with increasing interest.

She heard the clatter of pounding hoofs far up the street. She turned her head and saw a band of horsemen wheel into view. The bright morning sunlight shone strangely on the guns in their hands. As they thundered past Judge Avery's office fire flamed from their ranks. She gasped, turned and saw the black clad man whirl around, saw his guns leap into his hands. Then, as stark terror gripped her, she saw some of the horsemen spy the black clad man and point to him; saw them spur their horses and race toward him.

A scream died in her throat and something rooted her to the spot. She saw his guns belch fire, saw them blaze again and again, saw horses rear up on their hind legs and crash over backwards, pinning their riders beneath them; saw others stumble and hurl their riders over their heads, then plunge face downward into the rutted street. Guns flamed and roared and the thunder of leaden death deafened her while the blue smoke from the crashing guns blotted out everything. Horses and horsemen flashed past her in a blurred mass.

Then suddenly everything was still again, strangely and ominously hushed. The veil of gun smoke lifted gently into the sky. Frantically she sought him, sought him first among those who had fallen. Then she found him, miraculously alive, crouching and waiting in front of her very own door.

In the middle of the street men and horses lay writhing in agony; the latter screaming vainly, the former sobbing brokenly for help although they were beyond it. Others lay as they had fallen, grotesquely sprawled, still, broken and inert in death, some with hideous, pain-wracked expressions on their faces, others tight-lipped and grim-faced.

Then she saw the rest of the band of horsemen, far down the end of the street where they had halted and were now preparing for a second onslaught. She burst into the street. The black clad man turned his head.

"Git back inside!" he snapped.

She caught his arm.

"Please!" she begged. "Come inside. You'll be able to defend yourself there. You won't have a chance out here."

The thunder of pounding hoofs arose again.

"They're coming!" she cried in terror.

"C'mon!"

He caught her by the hand. Together they dashed across the intervening space and plunged into the house. The door slammed behind them just as the horsemen thundered up. A volley of shots riddled the door. He dragged her away from the door and pulled her down behind a big chair.

"Stay there!" he commanded.

He looked about the room quickly.

"To your left!" she cried.

He whirled past her into the bedroom, dropped to his knees at the curtained window through which she had watched him stride by but minutes before. His guns roared and smoke filled the house. Then she was at his side. He turned quickly, a stern rebuke on his lips. She placed a rifle beside him on the floor, pushed it closer, against his right knee, and slipped away. He holstered his Colts, caught up the rifle, levelled it and fired. The roar of the crashing rifle shook the house.

Then suddenly her terror was gone. She was calm, too, strangely and unexplainably calm. She dashed away, returned a minute later with a box of shells and huddled against the wall within reach of him. When he put down the rifle she took it quickly, reloaded it and handed it to him. He had drawn one of his Colts again but he holstered it at once and raised the rifle.

There was another window a bit farther away and she turned to it and looked out. Two men were sprawled in the middle of the street and beyond them, near the curb, lay a horse, its legs stiffening in death.

Now a horseman whirled up almost in front of the door. He raised his gun when the rifle boomed with deafening thunder and when the smoke cleared a bit both man and horse had been blasted into the middle of the street. She saw the horse thresh about but presently it lay still.

Two men on foot appeared suddenly, crouched behind a broad-trunked tree across the street. They stepped out together and fired as one. A bullet shattered the window and showered her with glass. Another bullet smashed a lamp on the bureau on the far side of the room. The rifle cracked in reply, once, then a second time.

SHE saw one man drop his gun and pitch forward into the gutter. The second man, gun raised for a second shot, plunged across the street toward the house when the rifle boomed. The man halted suddenly in his tracks. He dropped his gun. What had been his face was now a gaping, bloody mass. She turned her head away. When she dared look again, the man lay face downward in the gutter. His outstretched arms covered his face. Now the street was strangely silent again. Molly glanced at Marshall. He frowned, lowered the rifle and got to his feet and poked his head through the paneless window. He looked up and down the street and finally drew in his head.

"Have they . . . gone?" she asked.

He glanced at her and nodded.

"Reckon so," he answered.

He shifted his holsters and turned to her and held out the rifle. She came forward then and took it from him.

"I'm obliged t' yuh, Ma'am," he said simply. He looked around the room. "They shore made a mess uv it, didn't they?"

She smiled wanly.

"It doesn't matter," she answered quietly. "I'll be leaving here soon . . . for good."

"That so?"

"Yes."

"What about yo' folks?"

"I haven't any . . . now."

He looked at her sharply.

"You wouldn't be . . . ."

"Molly Lanning? Yes."

"Th' Judge told me 'bout yuh an' yo' father. Reckon he musta thought a heap o' Pop."

She made no answer.

"An' now yuh're goin' away," he mused. "Where yuh plannin' t' go?"

She shrugged her slim shoulder.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered.

"Some place where I can get a job teaching school."

"Uh-huh. Why can't yuh stay right here and teach?" he asked.

She turned slowly toward the window and drew back the curtain.

"There's Lodeville. What do you see there? Saloons and stores but nothing that even faintly resembles a schoolhouse. Why isn't there one? Because the people of Lodeville never had any education and can't see why their children should."

"Anythin' else?"

"Oh, yes. Teaching goes hand in hand with law and order. And certainly you should know about law and order in Lodeville. You saw something of it just a few minutes ago."

"Go on."

"There's no telling when a gun fight may break out and the streets become unsafe for everyone. Or the outlaws sweep down from the Pass, just as they did today. People don't dare bring their children into town. They keep them at home."

"I see. S'ppose now . . . 'course yuh gotta understand I'm on'y askin' . . . s'ppose all them things were changed. Would yuh consider stayin' on?"

She was silent in thought for a moment.

"Yes," she replied. "I would. After all, this is the only home I've ever known or had."

"Reckon that's 'bout all I c'n ask." He hitched up his gun belt. "Yuh'll hafta gimme a little time, y'know."

She turned away from the window and faced him again.

"It'll be you against Lodeville. What do you think you'll be able to do against such odds?" she asked, a half smile on her face.

"S'ppose yuh leave that t' me? You know teachin'. I'm gonna show yuh what I know 'bout my job."

She studied his face for a brief moment.

"All right," she said shortly. "It's a deal."

MARSHALL strode briskly along the street. He glanced fleetingly at the sprawled figures of both men and horses in the gutter. He heard a shrill neigh and looked up quickly. It was the big black idling at the hitching rail in front of the Judge's office. Then Marshall's eyes narrowed. A group of men were crowding around the office door.

"What th' . . ." he muttered.

He quickened his pace but his impatience and curiosity got the better of him and he broke into a run. The black neighed again and one or two of the men turned and glanced at him. The others paid no attention to him. Marshall raced up.

"Awright, men," he panted. "Lemme through."

Some of the men glanced at him and moved aside. Others made no attempt to move. Marshall grunted and shouldered his way through them and stepped into the office. Just beyond the door, beneath an overturned chair, lay Smith Jenkins. Marshall bent over him quickly. There was a bloody smear on the Ranger's chest and a black-rimmed, gaping hole in his left shoulder. He was breathing but with difficulty. The black clad man straightened up and strode to the desk and looked down. Judge Avery lay behind the desk. Swiftly Marshall bent over him. He shook his head slowly. The Judge was dead.

"Hey!" Marshall called.

Someone answered from outside.

"Yeah?"

"Got a doctor in town?"

"We're s'pposed t' have."

A coarse laugh arose from someone beyond the speaker.

"S'pposed ter is right."

"Someb'dy go git 'im, willya?"

There was a momentary silence.

"Mebbe yuh better go after 'im, y'self, Sheriff," a man in the doorway said. "That's th' on'y way yuh'll git 'im t' come. Like's not yuh'll find him holdin' up th' bar over at th' Golden Nugget."

Marshall's lips thinned. He straightened up, hitched up his belt again and strode out, shouldering his way through the crowd at the door and marched down the street. Some of the men followed close behind him, anxious to see what was going to happen. Halfway down the street he crossed over and strode into the Golden Nugget. He halted momentarily in the doorway.

A handful of men were lined up at the bar. Some of them turned slightly, glanced at him casually and turned away again. One or two nudged the men nearest them and nodded mutely toward the black clad figure in the doorway. At a nearby table, to the right of the bar, four men were playing cards. The dealer halted his hand in mid-air. His companions noted it and turned as one and looked over at Marshall.

The barkeeper stopped mopping the glistening surface of the bar and looked up.

"Lookin' for someb'dy, Mister?" he asked.

Marshall nodded grimly.

"Where'll I find th' Doc?"

The barkeeper's eyebrows arched.

"Th' Doc, eh?" He nodded toward a distant, corner table. Marshall's eyes followed the man's nod. At a corner table, in a dark, shadowy corner of the saloon, sat a man, his head bowed. "There's yo' man, Mister."

Marshall grunted. He strode the length of the saloon and halted presently beside the man.

"Doc," he said.

The man stirred, grunted and raised his head slowly. Black circled, red-rimmed eyes opened and focused themselves upon the black clad man.

"Wassamatter?"

Marshall leaned over the table.

"Got a job for yuh, Doc. Pull y'self t'gether," he said in a low tone.

The man reached for the bottle but Marshall whisked it away, out of the man's reach.

"C'mon," he said curtly.

"Why don'tcha leave 'im be?" a voice said behind him.

Marshall straightened up. He turned slowly. A burly man with a drink-reddened face lurched into him. Marshall shoved him away. The man staggered back and nearly fell but he collided with a table and braced himself against it and straightened up. His hand jerked toward his holster. Marshall whirled across the floor.

He drove his left fist wrist-deep into the man's ample stomach and hooked his right solidly to the man's jaw. The man crashed over backwards, pulling the table down with him. Marshall strode over, pushed the table away, bent over the man and jerked out the latter's half drawn gun and shoved it into his own belt.

He straightened up and turned again and halted beside the drunken doctor. He dragged the man out of his chair, swung him up and over his shoulder, shifted his burden briefly and strode past the bar. He nodded to the barkeeper and trudged out. Some of the men who had followed him to the Golden Nugget had halted in the doorway. They moved aside now and when he had passed them, they fell in behind him again. He stopped and looked down the street. He thought he had spied a watering trough before. He saw it now again, just a short distance down the street, shifted his burden again and marched off.

Presently he halted in front of the trough, lowered the man to the ground, got a firm grip on him and shoved him, headfirst, into the water. The man choked and sputtered, gasped and fought to get away. But Marshall held firm, held him there until he was satisfied that the water had sobered him up, then he jerked the man to his feet.

"Yuh awright now?" Marshall asked. The man mumbled an indistinct reply. "Head for Judge Avery's office."

The man turned slowly and stumbled away. Marshall eyed him for a moment, shook his head, ranged himself alongside and gripped the man by his arm and piloted him across the street.

CHAPTER VII

THE black followed a sharp trail that dipped down into the valley, made his way down without any mishaps and finally reached level ground again. About a hundred yards ahead of them was a group of shacks surrounded by a makeshift fence. There was a sign nailed to the fence but from a distance its lettering was indistinct. The black halted.

"Reckon this it," Marshall muttered, half aloud.

He nudged his horse with his knees and they went forward again at a trot. Then they were close enough to the fence to read the sign.

"Golden Nugget Mine" it said. A door banged suddenly somewhere within the enclosure.

"Hol' on!" a voice yelled.

Marshall jerked his mount to a stop.

"This is private prope'ty," the unseen voice added curtly. "Where yuh goin'?"

"I'm lookin' for Jim Stevens," Marshall answered. "If he's around tell 'im th' Sheriff o' Lodeville'd like t' talk to 'im."

There was a moment's silence.

"Stay where yuh are," the voice commanded.

Presently a gate in the fence creaked and swung open. A tall man appeared, his thumbs hooked in his gun belt. A man armed with a rifle stood behind him.

"I'm Stevens," the tall man announced. "What c'n I do for yuh?"

Marshall grinned.

"Yuh might ask me in," he said quietly.

Stevens eyed him for a moment, then he turned slightly.

"Open 'er," he said to the rifleman behind him. The gate swung wide. "Awright, Sheriff . . . come on in."

The black went on, through the gate and halted again just inside the enclosure. Marshall dismounted.

"Reckon we'd better go inter th' office," Stevens said presently. "Yuh c'n leave yo' horse right where he is. Sam . . . close th' gate."

The rifleman nodded, gave Marshall a swift glance of appraisal, stepped around him and slammed the gate shut.

"Foller me," Stevens said briefly.

He led the way into one of the shacks, a severely plain affair which housed a desk and two hard, straight backed chairs. Stevens took one of them and nodded toward the other. Marshall seated himself.

"Wa-al?" Stevens asked.

"Reckon I'd better tell yuh right off that I'm here for a favor," Marshall began. He paused for a moment. "Want me t' go on?"

"I c'n listen," Stevens answered dryly. "That won't cost nuthin'."

The black clad man grinned.

"Who sent yuh t' me?" the mine owner asked.

"Molly Lanning."

"I see. Go 'head."

"Wa-al," Marshall began, "I need help . . . men. I cain't raise a posse in town an' Molly told me that you got some eight or ten men here . . . good men, too. I was wonderin' if I could borrer a couple o' them."

"H'm."

"'Course, y'understand, Stevens," Marshall went on. "I don't expect them fellers t' work for me for nuthin'. I aim t' pay 'em."

Stevens grunted.

"'Course. An' what are yuh plannin' t' pay 'em with?" he demanded.

The black clad man grinned.

"Money," he answered simply.

The mine owner gave him a sidelong glance.

"An' where are yuh plannin' t' git all this money?" he asked.

"Frum th' storekeepers," Marshall said calmly. "Taxes, y'know."

Stevens nodded thoughtfully.

"That's awright," he said slowly, "far's it goes. On'y yuh're gonna have one hell uv a time collectin'."

Marshall grinned again.

"Yuh think so?"

"'Course I do."

"Mebbe it won't be s' hard," the black clad man said quietly, "once I show 'em that I mean bus'ness."

His eyes dropped to the brace of heavy Colts which hung against his thighs. He patted his holsters significantly. Stevens smiled.

"Them Colts o' yourn might p'rsuade 'em, awright," he admitted. "What's th' Judge think o' this?"

"Didn't ask 'im."

"Don't yuh think yuh oughta?"

"Wouldn't do no good," Marshall replied. "Th' Judge is dead."

Stevens jerked himself upright in his chair.

"No!"

Marshall nodded grimly.

"He's about as dead's he'll ever be," he said. "A gang o' mavericks rode inter town this mornin', pulled up in front uv th' Judge's office an' blasted it t' hell an' back. Th' Judge was riddled."

Stevens' eyes glinted.

"Th' dirty coyotes!" he gritted.

Marshall nodded again.

"I got some o' them," he went on, "but there's more where they come from. I aim t' go after 'em one o' these days an' clean 'em out for good."

"Lemme me know when yuh're ready," Stevens said grimly. "Me an' my men'll be tickled t' death t' have a hand in it."

Marshall got to his feet.

"How 'bout th' men I asked yuh for?" he demanded.

Stevens arose and strode to the open doorway.

"Sam!" he yelled.

The rifleman appeared on the run.

"Tell Mike Burke an' Monte Gleason I want 'em," Stevens ordered.

"Shore, Boss."

"An' tell 'em t' bring their horses," the mine owner added.

"Shore."

Ten minutes later two armed men accompanied Marshall when he rode out through the gate.

"Lemme know how yuh make out," Stevens yelled after them.

Marshall turned in his saddle.

"I shore will," he answered. He settled himself in his saddle. "Let's go."

The black bounded ahead. Burke and Gleason spurred their mounts and raced after him.

THE three pulled up in front of Molly Lanning's house. A group of men were idling on the opposite side of the street. They halted their conversation and looked up interestedly. Gleason, a lanky man with a shock of red hair and a ready grin, glanced at them, then at the dead men and horses in the gutter. Burke, short, stolid and grim-faced, stared at the sprawled figures with widening eyes.

"What th' . . . ." he began.

Gleason grinned lightly.

"Looks like things have been goin' on 'round here," he remarked and shot a sidelong glance at Marshall,

The latter nodded grimly.

"They shore have," he answered. "Those fellers were part uv a gang that come down frum th' Pass."

Gleason's eyebrows arched.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Uh-huh. They killed Judge Avery an' shot up th' Ranger who was sent here t' kinda r'mind folks that law an' order aren't part o' th' past."

"H'm," Gleason muttered. "But bein' that yuh're still alive, it looks like th' gen'ral clean-up they figgered t' make didn't pan out."

The black clad man grinned.

"Guess it does look that way, awright."

He dismounted and tossed the reins over the black's head.

"Be out in a minute," he said over his shoulder.

He hitched up his belt and strode briskly to the door but it opened before he could knock. Molly appeared in the doorway. She held her finger against her lips, a mute warning against loud talking. He nodded understandingly. She glanced at the two mounted men for a brief moment, stepped aside so that he could enter, then she quietly closed the door.

"They're Stevens' men, aren't they?" she asked in a low voice.

"Uh-huh. How's Jenkins?"

"He was asleep when I looked in a few minutes ago."

"Where's th' doc?"

"With Jenkins."

"Give yuh any trouble?" Marshall asked.

She shook her head.

"N-o. He mumbled a lot . . . about the dousing, I suppose. Then he got busy with Jenkins and evidently forgot about it," she answered.

"What'd he say 'bout Jenkins?"

"Not very much . . . merely that he'll probably pull through all right."

"Uh-huh."

He turned toward the door, hesitated and turned to her again.

"That was mighty fine uv yuh," he began, "lettin' me bring Jenkins here. I won't forgit it in a hurry."

"That was the least I could do," she said quietly. "Besides, taking care of him will give me something to do."

He eyed her for a moment, then turned toward the door a second time. His hand tightened around the doorknob.

"Oh, yeah," he said and faced her again.

"Yes?"

"I'm goin' t' Red River," he began. "I oughta be back in a couple o' hours at th' most. Just so nuthin' else c'n happen 'round here, I'm leavin' Stevens' men on guard. They'll come in handy if yuh git 'ny s'prise callers."

"You're going through the Pass. . . alone?" she asked.

"Shore."

He noticed the expression on her face and laughed lightly.

"Heck, yuh dont hafta worry none 'bout me," he said reassuringly. "Nob'dy'll bother me."

He turned again, opened the door and smiled at her over his shoulder.

"See yuh later."

He stepped outside and carefully closed the door behind him. Gleason and Burke looked up. He strode over to them.

"Reckon yuh might's well git down," he said briefly.

The two men dismounted.

"Take yo' horses 'round to th' back," he added. "I'll wait for yuh here."

They led their mounts away, glanced curiously at the house as they passed it. They returned a minute later carrying their rifles. Marshall nodded approvingly.

"I gotta go over t' Red River," he told them. "You fellers keep 'n eye on things here while I'm away."

Both nodded.

"Either o' yuh know Devery . . . th' undertaker?" Marshall asked.

"I do," Burke said quickly. "That's his place down th' street . . . th' livery stable near th' corner."

"Long's you know 'im, Burke . . . s'ppose you go see 'im? Have him come git these critters layin' in th' gutter. Mebbe he c'n do somethin' 'bout haulin' away th' horses, too? Find out, willya?"

Burke nodded.

"You . . . Gleason."

"Yeah?"

"You stay here an' sorta keep yo' eyes peeled . . . savvy?"

"Shore. Anythin' else?"

"N-o, nuthin' special. 'Course if anythin' happens 'round here, I'm d'pendin' on you fellers t' handle it."

Gleason grinned.

"We'll shore try t' handle it," he said lightly, then his tone changed. "Mebbe yuh better keep yo' own eyes peeled once yuh git inside th' Pass."

The black clad man's eyes gleamed with a sudden, steely light.

"I aim to, Mister."

He nodded to them, caught up the reins and vaulted lightly into the saddle. He wheeled the black.

"So long," he called.

"So long."

The big horse cantered away. The two men looked after him.

"Notice them eyes o' his?" Burke asked presently.

Gleason nodded.

"Shore did, Mike. Like two hunks o' ice," he answered.

Burke shuddered.

"Uh-huh. They gimme th' funniest feelin' inside m' belly," he said. "I'll bet that hombre's powerful bad medicine once he gits riled up. B'lieve me, Monte, there's one feller I don't aim t' tangle with. I'm gonna see to it that he don't git down on me."

His companion grinned.

"Reckon them galoots a-layin' out there in the street feel th' same way 'bout him now . . . on'y it's a heap too late for them t' do 'nythin' about it."

Burke grunted.

"Wa-al, I don't aim t' let it git too late for me," he said doggedly. He held out his rifle. "Hold onter this, willya? I'm goin' after Devery right now. Marshall ain't never gonna git th' chance t' say that Mike Burke didn't do like he told 'im ter . . . an' when he told 'im."

He grinned, wheeled and strode down the street.

CHAPTER VIII

THE summits of the Pass loomed up ahead. Marshall loosened the Colts in their holsters, took a firmer grip on the reins.

His keen eyes ranged upward . . . up along the rocky, rutted road that wound upward and through the Pass. Beyond the rugged summits of the Pass itself, where the road dipped sharply downward, he could see nothing . . . nothing but a broad expanse of blue sky as though the road ended there and fell away into space. His eyes swept over the rugged terrain and over the huge, bald-faced boulders which loomed up like forts on both sides of the roadway.

There was a strange, hushed, almost forbidding silence about the place and it communicated itself to both man and horse. The latter slackened his pace to a mere jog. The black clad man shifted the reins to his left hand so that his right hand dangled crablike within easy reach of the butt of a heavy Colt. When he thought he detected a swift, shadowy movement behind one of the boulders his hand dropped instantly and curled around the butt of the gun. The black halted.

Marshall frowned. He studied the boulder but nothing moved again and nothing happened. He watched through narrowed eyes for another minute, a brief minute that seemed eternal, then he relaxed.

"All them warnin's have got me as jumpy as an old woman," he muttered to himself. He nudged the black with his knees. "Go 'head."

The big horse went on again, slowly, at a measured pace. Marshall half drew his gun. Now they were climbing, approaching the very boulder which he had eyed so suspiciously but a minute before . . . . now they were abreast of it . . . past it. The jagged walls of the arched Pass were just ahead of them. They seemed even more forbidding, loftier . . . than before. The hushed silence hung like a pall over the road and within the confines of the Pass, a curtain that was suddenly oppressive and breath-taking. Another minute and they would be through the Pass.

The black screamed suddenly . . . a deep throated cry of terror and panic . . . bounded ahead in a wild, frantic, uncontrollable lunge that devoured space. There was no stopping the fear-maddened beast which sought only to escape an unseen something that seemed to be closing in around him.

Blurred figures arose in the road ahead . . . blurred figures that were men with guns in their hands, guns that flamed and roared and added to the horse's fright. The black was upon them in an instant, a thundering avalanche that tossed them aside as though they were leaves attempting to breast a sudden, violent gale. He plunged through the Pass like a runaway locomotive. Then they were whirling down the sharply dipping road to safety.

Marshall had thrown himself forward, his arms around the black's neck, his face buried in the silken mane. He raised his head and stole a look backward. The Pass was fading fast. He straightened up and laughed softly and jerked the reins. The black slackened his pace. In the distance a thin wisp of smoke curled lazily upward into the broad blue sky. As they rode toward it, the wisp of smoke deepened a bit. Marshall eyed it with satisfaction. They were nearing Red River. He leaned forward in the saddle and patted the black's sleek neck.

"Good boy," he said.

The big horse neighed and settled down to an easy, loping pace.

MOLLY opened the door and looked out. She noted at once that the sprawled figures in the gutter were gone. The widening splashes of blood too had disappeared. Monte Gleason, his rifle across his knees, was squatting on his heels just a few feet beyond the door. He looked up, arose somewhat stiffly and sauntered over.

"Yes'm?"

Molly smiled.

"I was just wondering if you were still here," she said.

Gleason grinned.

"Th' Sheriff said for us t' stay put an' that's just what we're doin', Ma'm. Want somethin?"

"N-o. He should be getting back soon, shouldn't he?" she asked.

Gleason nodded.

"Most any time now, I reckon," he replied.

Her face clouded suddenly.

"Provided, of course, that he hasn't run into trouble in the Pass," she said shortly.

He gave her a sidelong glance.

"I wouldn't worry none 'bout him, Ma'm," he said presently, reassuringly. "He looks like he c'n take good care uv 'imselt an' for my money, anybody that tries t' git gay with him is shore gonna wish they'd let 'im alone."

They turned when they heard a step. Mike Burke ambled into view from his post at the rear of the house. He looked over at them, hesitated for a moment, then he shifted his rifle and sauntered over.

"This is Mike Burke, Ma'm," Gleason said. "'Course he ain't a-tall handsome . . . . like me for instance . . . still he ain't th' worst kind t' have around when things start poppin'. Step up, Mike, an' say 'howdy' t' th' lady."

Burke grinned.

"Howdy, Ma'm, an' don't b'lieve a word that mangey red-head says. He's about th' biggest an' doggonedest liar in these parts. B'sides, if he's what yuh'd call good t' look at, shucks, I've seen prettier faces on steers. An' I reckon you know how pretty they are."

"There y'are, Ma'm . . . jealous as a woman, ain't he?" Gleason demanded. "G'wan, yuh runt."

Molly smiled.

"I think I've seen Mr. Burke at the mine," she said.

"'Course yuh have," Gleason said quickly, winking at her. "But yuh never seen him workin'. He ain't big enough for that. On'y time he's man-size is when th' Boss pays off."

Molly laughed lightly.

"I'd better go in now," she said. "There's a pot of coffee in the kitchen . . . oh, yes . . . and a pan of biscuits. Don't hesitate to ask for them when you want them."

"Thank you, Ma'm," Gleason said gravely. "An' if there's anythin' yuh want, sing out. I'll be right here. 'Course Burke won't hear yuh. He'll prob'bly be takin' a nap in th' back o' th' house."

The door closed behind her. Mike gave him a murderous glare.

"Why, yuh long-legged polecat," he began. "I oughta bust yuh one an' bring yuh down t' my size an' take yuh apart, on'y . . ."

"On'y what, yuh wart?"

Burke grinned.

"On'y I got other things t' do," he answered.

Gleason snorted loudly.

"Oh, yeah? S'ppose yuh gimme a f'r instance?" he demanded.

"Shore."

"Wa-al?"

Mike shifted his rifle.

"Wa-al," he began. "First off, I'm goin 'round t' th' back door an' have a couple o' cups o' coffee an' mebbe a hull mess o' them biscuits she was talkin' 'bout. I allus did go f'r them, y'know. After I git m' belly full up, I'll just go find me a nice, shady spot an' take a nap."

Gleason's lips thinned.

"Git outta here!" he said through his teeth. "Yuh . . . yuh squaw!"

GLEASON looked up when he heard a clatter of hoofs. He raised his rifle and ran out toward the street. A party of horsemen swung into view. A black clad man astride a big black horse rode at the head of the troop. Gleason lowered his rifle. Mike Burke, his rifle ready, rushed up.

"What is it?" he demanded.

Gleason gave him a cold stare.

"Wipe them crumbs offa yo' mouth, yuh runt," he commanded. "Yuh got biscuits an' coffee comin' outta yo pores."

Burke grinned.

"Jealous, that's all."

Marshall pulled up. The horsemen behind him reined in too. When he dismounted, they did, too.

"Made it awright, eh?" Gleason asked.

Marshall nodded.

"Uh-huh. Anythin' happen here?" he asked.

"Nope. Where'd yuh dig up th' army?" Gleason asked.

The black clad man glanced at the men standing beside their horses, then at Gleason again.

"R'cruited 'em over t' Red River," he replied. "Now we c'n git down t' bus'ness."

"What's first on th' sched'le?" Burke asked.

"Tell yuh 'bout it in a minute," Marshall answered. He turned. "C'mere, men."

The men sauntered forward.

"This red-headed feller's Gleason," Marshall began, nodding toward the lanky red-head. "Th' other feller's Burke. When I ain't around, they're in charge, savvy?"

The men nodded.

"Awright now," Marshall went on. "This is Johnny Bradley. What's yo' name, Mister? Oh, yeah . . . it's Thomas, ain't it?"

"Link Thomas."

"Uh-huh. Now this feller's Joe Bronson . . . that's his brother Pete standin' 'longside o' him. This big feller's Art Johnson. Right? Now yuh know each other. Like I told yuh when I hired yuh . . . we got a man sized job t' do here so we're gonna git started on it pronto. S'ppose yuh all come 'long with me down t' th' Judge's office?"

"Want me t' tag along too?" Gleason asked.

Marshall considered for a moment.

"N-o . . . reckon not," he answered finally. "You better stay put. Oh, yeah . . . Gleason . . ." He dug in his pocket and produced a badge. "Here yuh are. Yuh're a deputy now. Put it on. I'll give th' others theirs later on."

Gleason grinned, took the badge and pinned it on his shirt front. He rubbed it vigorously with his handkerchief. When it gleamed, he pocketed his handkerchief and looked down at Burke who was eyeing him critically.

"Reckon yuh know what I am now, eh, runt?" he asked.

Mike snorted.

"Knew what yuh were long ago," he retorted.

A grin spread over the men's faces.

"Let's go."

The newcomers turned to their horses. Marshall and Burke started down the street, the others followed, leading their horses. Gleason took out his handkerchief again and polished his badge with renewed vigor.

CHAPTER IX

THERE was a great ado in and around the Judge's office and groups of curious townsmen stopped to see what was going on. They saw men, strangers to Lodeville, plying hammers and saws industriously. Two of the townsmen halted near the door which was ajar and peered inside.

"What d'yuh make uv it?" one man asked.

"Dunno," his companion answered. "Looks like they're buildin' walls inside th' old ones. Lookit them boards, willya! Hell . . . they're thicker'n my fist."

"They shore are."

They lapsed into silence again and watched a while longer, then they turned and strolled away.

A few minutes later Marshall sauntered around from the rear of the building. He halted in front of the door and examined a bullet-riddled panel in the door.

"What's goin' on 'round here?" someone asked at his elbow.

"Nuthin' much," he answered casually, over his shoulder. "Just buildin' a jail."

"A jail, eh?" the man echoed. Then he laughed coarsely. "Yuh better make it a strong one, Mister."

Marshall turned slowly. A burly man was his interrogator.

"We aim t' make it strong."

"Soon as Greg Benton hears 'bout it," the man went on, "he'll give yuh a chance t' see if them big boards c'n stand up under a slug fr'm his Winchester."

Marshall smiled patiently.

"We'll be right glad t' have him pay us a call," he answered evenly.

The man frowned.

"Mebbe yuh won't be so danged cocky once he does show up," he retorted sharply. "Anyway, yuh won't hafta send him no invite. He ain't th' kind that waits t' be asked. He'll come soon's he's got a mind ter."

He gave his belt an emphatic hitch, turned on his heel and trudged away. Marshall watched him for a minute, a smile of amusement on his face, then he turned slowly and strolled around to the rear.

MARSHALL halted in the doorway of the Golden Nugget. There were some six or seven men idling at the bar. They looked up, glanced at him and promptly looked away again. Two or three even moved away from the bar, carrying their glasses away to one of the vacant tables to the right of the bar. Marshall sauntered inside and halted at the bar. The barkeeper put down a glass he was drying.

"Howdy, Sheriff. What'll yuh have this time?"

"Whiskey."

"Comin' at yuh."

An uncorked bottle slid along the glistening surface of the bar. A big hand shot out and halted it. A glass followed. Marshall poured himself a drink. The barkeeper eyed him appraisingly, watched him drain the glass and set it down again.

"Got a pretty good thing uv it here, eh?" Marshall asked casually.

"Yeah . . . reckon I have."

"Own it y'self?"

"Yep . . . it's all mine."

Marshall was silent for a moment.

"What d'yuh hafta do t' open a place like this?" he asked presently. "Hafta have a license or a permit?"

The barkeeper grinned.

"Thinkin' o' goin' inter bus'ness, Sheriff?" he asked.

"N-o, reckon not," the black clad man answered. "Just bein' curious. What's yo' license look like?"

The barkeeper eyed him sharply.

"What's b'hind all this, Sheriff?" he asked shortly.

"Nuthin'. I'm just askin' t' see yo' license, that's all. 'Course yuh got one, ain't yuh?"

A frown clouded the barkeeper's face. He moistened his lips with his tongue. He leaned over the bar.

"Yuh mind steppin' inter th' office with me for a minute?" he asked, nodding toward a closed door at the far end of the saloon.

The black clad man smiled.

"Got yo' license in there?" he asked innocently.

A sly grin spread over the barkeeper's face.

"That safe o' mine holds a heap o' things," he said quietly, yet significantly.

Marshall straightened up.

"Reckon it does," he answered calmly. "On'y nuthin' that yuh got in it c'n int'rest me . . . see?"

He produced a coin and dropped it on the damp bar.

"I'll be back later," he continued. "'Less yo' license is hangin' right out here where everybody c'n see it, I'll close yuh up. Understand?"

He wheeled and strode toward the door, halted and turned around.

"Don't count on Greg Benton helpin' yuh outta this," he said curtly. "He ain't runnin' this town 'nymore . . . I am. Yuh'll be doin' y'self a favor if yuh'll kinda keep that in mind."

He turned again and continued toward the door. The barkeeper scowled and mumbled something under his breath. Then swiftly he reached for something that lay on a ledge beneath the edge of the bar. . . gripped it angrily and jerked it upward.

His hand and the gun in it halted in mid-air.

A tall, lean, red-headed man . . . a stranger with a polished badge on his shirt-front . . . was standing in the doorway, his right hand dangling crablike just above the butt of his gun. Something in the man's manner made the barkeeper change his mind. Slowly he lowered his arm. The stranger watching him smiled. He nodded to Marshall, waited until the black clad man had crossed the threshold and turned down the street, then he gave the barkeeper a cold, insolent, taunting grin, backed out and disappeared.

Marshall halted presently in front of the Last Chance . . . a smaller saloon than the Golden Nugget. Gleason, trailing along behind him, slowed down and waited until Marshall had entered, then he too halted, just beyond the door.

Two men were drinking at the bar. They looked up casually. Marshall leaned over the bar. A stocky man with a towel slung over his shoulder placed a bottle and a glass in front of him. Marshall shoved them aside.

"Yuh work here or do yuh own it?" he asked, looking around the place.

The stocky man smiled.

"Both," he answered. "Reckon you must be th' new Sheriff . . . right? Somethin' I c'n do for yuh?"

"Yep. S'ppose yuh trot out yo' license?"

The man frowned.

"License?" he repeated. "What's a license?"

Marshall smiled patiently.

"Quit stallin', Mister. Lemme see what kind uv a liquor license yuh got."

The man laughed lightly . . . a forced but hollow laugh.

"Oh . . . that, eh?"

"Uh-huh."

The man grinned easily now.

"Now, lemme see," he began. "Where'n hell did I see th' thing?"

Marshall grunted.

"Home . . . on top o' th' pianner."

The man snapped his fingers.

"Doggone it, Sheriff . . . that's just where I saw th' blamed thing."

"That's what I figgered."

"Yuh're some figgerer. Anythin' else on yo' mind?"

Marshall shook his head.

"Nope."

The man breathed easier now.

"Come in again, Sheriff . . . when I ain't s' busy."

"I aim to."

"Shore . . . shore . . . any time."

MARSHALL hitched up his belt, turned slowly and trudged toward the door. The stocky man grinned at the two men at the bar. In the doorway Marshall halted and turned again. The man laughed.

"Think o' somethin' else, Sheriff?"

"Yep. If yo' license ain't right where I c'n see it when I stop by later . . . I'm closin' yuh up. See if yuh c'n laugh that one off."

"Hey . . . wait a minute, willya?"

The man dropped the towel on the dripping spigot of a beer barrel. He came around the end of the bar with surprising suddenness.

"Look here, Mister," he said quickly. "There ain't no call for yuh t' git sore 'bout a little kiddin'. S'ppose we set down someplace an' kinda talk this thing over? Awright?"

"Nope. Have yo' license where I c'n see it . . . or close up."

"But, doggone it . . . ."

"Yuh heard me," Marshall said with finality. "I'll be 'round this way again later."

Gleason edged into the doorway, his right hand resting lightly but warningly on the butt of his gun. The stocky man glared at him, turned slowly and made his way around the bar. Marshall strode out. Again Gleason waited until the black clad man had gone, then he grinned tauntingly at the stocky, frowning man behind the bar, backed out of the doorway and disappeared.

The Pot o' Gold, another saloon some thirty or forty feet down the street from the Last Chance, was the next objective. Gleason, following Marshall's heels, slowed down as before, waited until Marshall had entered the place, then he took up his post just within range of the door.

The place was fairly well crowded, with a number of tables occupied and some five or six men leaning against the bar. They looked up mechanically when Marshall sauntered in. He halted at the bar. A tall man with an unruly mop of jet black hair was wiping the mirror behind the bar. He looked at the mirror critically, put down the towel he had been using and turned around.

"Howdy, Mister," he said. He looked sharply at Marshall. "Yo' name's Marshall, ain't it?"

"Yep. 'Case yuh don't know it, I'm th' Sheriff. Who owns this place?"

"Mike Finneran."

"Where's he at?"

The man grinned a toothless grin.

"Yuh're lookin' at 'im."

"Oh, yeah? Awright then, Finneran . . . trot out yo' liquor license an' don't gimme no spiel 'bout leavin' it home on th' pianner if you ain't got it."

"Ain't got 'ny."

Marshall's eyebrows arched.

"Yuh ain't, eh? Wa-al, at least yuh're honest about it. How come yuh never got 'ny?"

Finneran shrugged his shoulder.

"All I c'n tell yuh is that when I took over this place, th' feller I bought it fr'm told me I didn't need no license. All I had t' do . . . an' I've been doin' it reg'lar every month since . . . was hand Greg Benton ten bucks. Nob'dy bothered me, so ten bucks was dirt cheap. Wa-al, what do I do now . . . hand you th' ten an' tell Benton t' go t' hell . . . or what?"

"I don't want 'ny part uv it. As for Benton . . . he's through here. He ain't runnin' Lodeville now. Th' law is . . . an' I repr'sent th' law. If yuh aim t' keep this place o' yourn open, better git y'self a license b'fore t'morrow mornin'. So long."

"So long."

Marshall nodded to him, wheeled and strode out. He bumped into Gleason in the doorway. The deputy grinned at him, side-stepped, glanced inside, then backed out after him.

One of the men at the bar looked up at Finneran.

"S-ay," he began. "He's just beggin' f'r trouble, ain't he? Hope he's a'ready made a deal f'r 'imself with th' undertaker. When Benton gits wind o' what he's doin' round here, he'll stuff that tin badge o' his down his throat."

"An' how," another remarked.

Finneran smiled.

"Don't worry too much 'bout him," he said quietly. "Neither uv yuh. He c'n take on a dozen Bentons an' finish 'em off without even workin' up a good sweat."

The first man scoffed.

"Oh, yeah? What makes him so hard t' handle?" he demanded.

Finneran smiled again, a bit more patiently than before.

"Mister," he began. "Yo' ignorance is shore r'freshin'. Shows what you know 'bout th' West. F'r yo' info'mation, that hombre's 'bout th' fastest draw an' by far th' damnedest shot yuh'll ever see . . . no matter how long yuh live. I seen 'im in action just once . . . but that once was more'n enough f'r me."

The first man frowned.

"Heard someb'dy say his name's Marshall. That right?"

"Uh-huh. On'y it ain't plain Tom or Dick or Harry Marshall. It's Mustang Marshall . . . an' Mister, just ask 'nybody who knows what's what 'bout th' West an' they'll tell yuh that his name means a heap more'n Billy th' Kid's an' a lot uv other fellers who were known f'r their gun-throwin'. Yes, sir-ee . . . if yuh ever see him go f'r them big Colts o' his, better find y'self a hole somewheres quick an' dive into it pronto . . . if yuh aim t' live an' tell about it."

CHAPTER X

LODEVILLE awoke bright and early with its customary thirst but found to its complete dismay that every saloon in town was closed. Groups of men, impatient for their usual morning 'eye-opener', gathered in front of their favorite saloon, tried the doors but when they found them locked, hammered on them in a last effort to awake their proprietors. They gave up finally in disgust.

"What'n hell d' yuh make o' this?' one indignant townsman demanded of another in front of the Golden Nugget.

"Yuh got me," the second man replied. "It ain't possible that they've all gone outta bus'ness, is it?"

The first man gave him a withering glare.

"'Course it ain't," he snapped.

A passerby, overhearing them, laughed and halted.

"Ain't you fellers heard that th' Sheriff closed 'em up?" he asked.

The first man's lips thinned.

"So that's it, eh?" he demanded thickly. "Who'n hell does he think he is?"

The passerby grinned. "Why don't yuh go ask 'im?" he taunted. "Mebbe he'll tell yuh . . . that an' more."

The first man glowered and mumbled

something under his breath. The passerby laughed again and went on his way.

ED BROWN, the owner of the Golden Nugget, leaned over the broad desk in what had once been Judge Avery's office.

"Two hun'erd an' fifty dollars!" he gasped. "Yuh crazy? What d'yuh think I'm made uv . . . money?"

Marshall grinned.

"I could answer that, Mister, on'y I ain't used that kinda language in a long time," he replied calmly. "If yuh aim t' stay in bus'ness, thats' what yo' license is gonna cost yuh. So git wise t' y'self an' either put up or shut up. Which'll it be?"

Brown's face was white with anger.

"This is a doggoned robb'ry," he rasped, "an' yuh're nuthin' but . . . ."

Marshall's eyes glinted.

"One more crack outta you, Mister," he said coldly, "an' I'll kick yuh teeth down yo' throat. That plain enough?"

Gleason leaned back against the closed door.

"Boss," he said clearly. "Mebbe he oughta have some time t' think things over. A couple o' days in th' back room'd do him a heap o' good. What d'yuh say?"

"I ain't payin' it," Brown sputtered. "Yuh're both crooks!"

Marshall whirled around the desk. Brown's hand streaked toward his holster. A big fist collided with his jaw. He staggered, tottered on buckling legs and finally toppled. Gleason bounded forward, caught him and lowered him to the floor. He straightened up presently.

"H'm," he mused after a moment. "Don't he look natural? Bet he's gonna have a bigger head fr'm that wallop than if he'da drunk up a hull barrel o' that stuff he sells over th' bar."

Marshall grunted and flexed the fingers of his right hand.

"He's been dealin' with crooks s' long," he muttered, "he figgers everybody's th' same."

Gleason grinned.

"Uh-huh. S'ppose we leave this sleepin' beauty right where he is? Seein' him might kinda discourage th' next feller with a hankerin' f'r callin' names."

"Yuh might have somethin' there," Marshall answered. "Who's next?"

Gleason turned, strode to the door and opened it.

"Next."

Mike Finneran pushed past him. Gleason quickly closed the door. Mike came to a sudden halt. He frowned and stared at the sprawled figure on the floor. He looked up presently.

"What happened t' him?" he asked. "Talk outta turn?"

"Not on'y that," Gleason answered, "but he talked a heap too much."

"I see."

"You got a hankerin' f'r name callin'?" Gleason asked with a grin.

"Nope."

"Then I reckon you an' th' Sheriff oughta git along fine. Step up to th' desk, Mister."

Finneran circled the sprawled figure of Ed Brown and halted again in front of the desk.

"What's th' license gonna cost me?" he asked.

Marshall consulted a sheet of paper on the desk. He ran his eye over a list of names.

"One hundred dollars," he said presently and looked up.

Finneran grunted.

"In cash?" he asked with a grin.

"In cash."

Finneran plunked a heavy canvas bag on the desk.

"There it is. Do I open up?"

"Right now. Yo' receipt'll be d'livered to yuh soon's Miss Lanning writes it out," Marshall answered. "That awright?"

"Yep. Anythin' else?"

"Nope. Reckon that's 'bout all."

Finneran nodded.

"I'm obliged to yuh, Sheriff."

Marshall grinned.

"For what?" he demanded. "For takin' yo' money?"

"Hell, no," Finneran answered quickly. "I'm obliged to yuh for wallopin' th' daylights outta that critter." He nodded toward the 'sleeping' Brown. "I've allus hoped that some day someb'dy'd hand him somethin' he'd never forgit. Reckon I'm more'n satisfied now."

He nodded to Marshall, turned and strode toward the door, nodded to Gleason who opened the door. Finneran marched out. Gleason closed the door again.

"S-ay," he said. "That feller's awright."

Marshall nodded.

"Uh-huh," he replied. "Hope there're s'more like him."

"Me too," Gleason said.

He opened the door and stuck his head out.

"Who's next?" he demanded.

"I am," Marshall heard an impatient voice answer. "Lemme in there so's I c'n tell that Sheriff a couple o' things."

"Come ahead, Mister," Gleason answered. "Th' Sheriff'll be right glad t' listen t' anythin' yuh got t' say. Come on in."

A SHORT, stocky man . . . the owner of the Last Chance . . . pushed past Gleason and halted abruptly just inside the office.

"Now, looka here, Sheriff," he sputtered. "I . . . I . . . . ."

The door closed quietly behind him. Gleason, tongue in cheek, leaned back against the door. The stocky man stared hard at the outstretched figure on the floor.

"You were sayin'," Marshall said, encouragingly.

"Shore, Mister . . . speak right up," Gleason added. "Yuh're 'mong friends."

The stocky man gulped loudly.

"How . . . how much?" he managed to ask.

"Step over here," Marshall said briefly.

The saloonkeeper skirted the 'sleeping beauty' and halted in front of the desk.

"One hundred an' fifty dollars," the black clad man said and waited for the outburst.

The stocky man swallowed hard.

"How . . . much?"

Marshall repeated the amount.

"Will yuh take 'n order on th' bank over t' Red River?" the man asked.

"Shore . . . if it's good."

"It's good awright. I got more'n that over there."

"Let's have it."

The owner of the Last Chance jerked out a heavy wallet and fumbled with its contents. Marshall looked up, caught Gleason's eye and winked. A slip of paper fluttered on the desk.

"There yuh are."

Marshall picked it up and glanced at it.

"Thanks," he said dryly. "When yuh git yo' license don't leave it on th' pianner. Hang on to it."

The man grunted, turned, glanced down at the floor, stuffed his wallet into his coat pocket and strode toward the door. Gleason opened the door.

"So long, Mister," he said. "Don't take 'ny wooden money."

The stocky man gave him a cold stare, stumbled momentarily over the threshold, straightened himself up with a jerk and marched out. Gleason grinned and closed the door.

"S-ay, this is a heap easier'n I figgered it was gonna be," he said.

"We ain't finished yet," Marshall countered pointedly.

"I know," Gleason said quickly. "Still, I was expectin' fireworks right off. 'Stead of that, outside o' this feller," nodding toward Brown who was struggling to sit up. "it's been downright peaceful. It's kinda disappointin'."

The door was suddenly flung open. Mike Burke, his face battered and bloodied and his shirt torn, staggered in.

"Sheriff!" he panted.

Marshall whirled around the desk. Gleason bounded forward and caught the sagging Burke in his arms.

"Mike!" he cried . "What happened?"

Marshall shoved a chair under the stocky deputy. Mike fought to get his breath. . . .

"Four fellers," he panted presently. "They . . . they. . . ."

"Take it easy," Marshall commanded.

Burke's heaving chest subsided gradually.

"I'm awright now," he began again.

"Go 'head then," Marshall answered.

"Four . . . fellers," Mike said jerkily. "Sneaked inter th' house . . . 'round th' back."

Marshall and Gleason exchanged significant glances.

"Yeah, Mike?" Gleason urged.

"They got th' girl. Took 'er out . . . th' back way . .. so's nob'dy'd see 'em."

"An'?"

"Thought I heard somethin' . . . like someb'dy tryin' t' holler but couldn't . . . rushed in an' some galoot jumped me. We wrestled around f'r a minute . . . then someb'dy belted me with th' butt uv a gun."

"H'm," Marshall muttered. "What about th' Ranger?"

"He's awright. They didn't bother 'bout him."

Marshall straightened up.

"So that's how Benton's gonna hit back," he mused. "Through th' girl."

Gleason hitched up his belt.

"What are we waitin' for?" he demanded.

Burke sat upright.

"You fellers ain't goin' without me," he said quickly. "Gimme 'nother gun. I want 'nother crack at them mavericks . . . 'specially a tall feller with a scar on his jaw."

Marshall strolled away toward the window. He looked out for a minute. He turned around again presently.

"Which way d' yuh figger they went?" he asked.

"To'ard th' Pass," Mike said quickly.

"Uh-huh."

Marshall tightened his belt. He looked over suddenly at Brown.

"Git outta here," he said curtly. "I'll take care o' you later."

Brown staggered to his feet.

"Lemme give yuh a tip, Mister," Marshall went on. "Yuh better watch that tongue o' yourn."

There was a curiously red welt on Brown's cheek and jaw. He touched it tenderly with his hand and grimaced. He glared at Marshall, plodded past him to the door, opened it and trudged out. The door slammed behind him.

"Wa-al?" Gleason demanded.

"You take Burke back to th' house. Fix 'im up an' leave 'im there. Then come back here. With one uv yuh here an' one at th' house, both'll be pr'tected 'case anybody tries anythin'."

Gleason frowned.

"An' yuh're goin' after them critters by y'self, eh?" he demanded.

Marshall grinned.

"Uh-huh."

Burke got to his feet.

"Yuh shoulda kept them Red River fellers on f'r a while longer," he said, "'stead o' lettin' 'em go soon's they finished r'buildin' this place."

Gleason nodded in agreement.

"Right," he added. "We shore coulda used 'em now."

"Wa-al," Marshall said dryly, "they ain't here 'ny longer, so why waste time talkin' 'bout 'em? You fellers know what yuh're t' do, so go 'head."

Gleason shook his head.

"Yuh're th' boss, Marshall," he said slowly, "but I shore wish yuh wouldn't be so danged set on goin' off by y'self. Yuh won't have much uv a chance against them outlaws."

The black clad man grinned again.

"If I don't come back," he answered, "you c'n be Sheriff. That awright?"

Gleason snorted.

"Nope," he retorted. "If you don't come back, Benton c'n have both th' job an' Lodeville. I don't want 'ny part uv either o' them. Go 'head, yuh mule."

CHAPTER XI

THE valley and the woodlands which encircled it formed a saucer; the woodlands standing on considerably higher ground than the valley. Heavy underbrush fringed the edge of the valley while sturdy, broad-trunked trees backgrounded the brush.

Marshall kept within the protective screening of the brush, sprawled at full length on his stomach. Directly below him was the Benton place. He looked down at it again . . . swept it at a glance . . . focused his eyes on the house itself just as he had done so many times before during those long, seemingly endless hours since he had begun his vigil. He rolled over and glanced skyward. The sun was drifting slowly toward the distant horizon. He turned over on his side and watched it for a minute and shook his head.

"Longest day I've ever put in," he muttered to himself. "Reckon it just ain't never gonna be night."

He came down again on his stomach and glared at the silent ranchhouse.

He had ridden steadily south upon leaving Lodeville, scorning the all-too-apparent trick to lure him into the Pass for he was certain that Molly Lanning had been kidnapped by Benton's men rather than by the outlaws who infested and inhabited the Pass and the rugged hills around it. He reasoned that Benton had had her kidnapped in order to provide himself with something worthwhile to offer in trade for his son who was still being 'boarded out' in Red River's jail.

Despite the fact that he had seen nothing of her, Marshall was certain that Molly was in the house he was watching. Doubtless, the men who had overpowered Burke and kidnapped her had long since delivered her to Greg Benton.

Marshall loosened the heavy Colts in their holsters. He did it almost mechanically, just as he had done it so many times before since his arrival there. He looked up at the sky again. This time he nodded

approvingly. The sun had halted now on the broad ledge of the horizon.

"Won't be s'long now," he muttered to himself.

Presently the sun slipped away. Its afterglow lit up the sky for a minute, then the rays faded out and left the sky empty and colorless. It grew dark swiftly. In the background the sturdy trees dimmed and became shadow-shrouded. As the darkness deepened they faded into the night.

Presently two lights appeared in some of the windows of the ranchhouse below. The huge barn beyond the house loomed up even larger in the darkness. A tiny, flickering, yellowish light gleamed in the single window of the low, squat bunkhouse some twenty feet beyond the hulking barn. Marshall climbed stiffly to his feet, hitched up his belt, turned and trudged away into the darkness among the trees. He returned presently, retracing his steps, playing out a long rope which he had made fast around the sturdy trunk of a great tree, jerked it so sharply that it actually hummed, then satisfied that it was securely knotted and that it would hold, pushed his way through the brush until he reached the very edge of the higher ground and dropped the remainder of the coil to the valley floor below.

Carefully he gripped the rope and made his way down too, following the rope hand over hand until he finally trod on level ground. He loosened his Colts again, straightened up and started off, only to halt again and look back, up over his shoulder at the brush. He had tethered the black up there among the trees and now he was making a mental picture of the spot so as to facilitate returning to it. Presently he started off again.

He went forward slowly and noiselessly lest his footsteps be overheard. He stumbled awkwardly over a half-buried rock and nearly fell, but he jerked himself erect and cursed himself for his clumsiness, deliberately circled the rock and went on again. He skirted the house at a respectful distance and swung toward the rear. All he wanted now was a close-up view of the house, then he would devise a plan of attack.

HE halted frequently, sometimes when he fancied that he had heard something move somewhere near him in that vast darkness and other times as a purely precautionary effort. That despite the fact that his black costume blended so perfectly with the night light. Finally he circled the house and reached the shadowy safety of the barn, halted and turned for another look at the house. He heard an approaching step, whirled like a flash and flattened out against the towering side of the barn. His right hand streaked toward his holster and tightened around his gun butt.

"That you, Tex?" a voice asked.

Marshall deliberated for a moment. It was useless, he speedily realized, if not dangerous too, to attempt to avoid the man. He had been seen. If he did not reply, or if he attempted to run he would be done for. He would have to take a chance, bide his time and when the opportunity arose . . . his hand came away from his gun. He stepped forward, away from the barn and into the shadowy but indistinguishable night light.

"Uh-huh," he answered.

The tall figure of a man came toward him.

"Watcha doin' out here?" the man asked, then he laughed lightly. "Heck, yuh don't mean t' say yuh got sore 'ccount uv what th' boys said?"

Marshall turned his back slowly. The man caught him by the arm and swung him around. Marshall's fist exploded in the man's face. The man fell against the barn, sagged on buckling legs and jerked himself upright again when lightning struck a second time, this time overpoweringly. The man tottered like a falling tree and pitched forward on his face. Marshall, on the alert, side-stepped the plunging man, straddled him and whipped off the man's belt, jerked his limp arms behind him and quickly bound them together. He looked around to make certain that there were no other observers present, got a firm grip on the man's shirt and dragged him forward toward the barn door.

Fortunately the door was open. He dragged the unconscious man inside, over the threshhold, spied a stack of hay close by and made for it. He dumped the man on the floor, covered him with hay and straightened up.

"F'r yo' sake, Mister," he muttered, "I shore hope they ain't too free wieldin' pitchforks 'round here."

He stepped outside again, considered for a moment, then he made his way around

the rear of the barn, emerged presently in the dim light and went on toward the bunkhouse. He glanced at the window. The yellow light he had seen there earlier was out. He tried the door. It opened without difficulty. He stepped inside and froze in his tracks.

"That you, Tex?" a sleepy voice asked.

"Yeah."

"Th' boys were on'y kiddin' yuh, y'know," the voice went on, then drowsily, "G'wan . . . git . . . t' . . . bed."

The voice trailed away as its owner dozed off again. Marshall closed the door quietly behind him. He stood still for a time, until his eyes grew accustomed to the darkness. Presently he was able to make out a chair, then a table, then the posts of the bunks which lined the walls. After a few minutes he dropped to his hands and knees and crawled forward.

His probing hands found a pair of boots. He went from bunk to bunk and finally, when he retraced his steps to the door, he had picked up nine pairs of boots. He put them down on the floor in a heap, grinned to himself and made a second trip. He had already noted that the sleeping punchers' gun belts were hanging from pegs directly above their respective bunks. It was a minute's work to remove them and carry them too to the door.

He slung the gun belts over his left shoulder, opened the door a bit, loaded his arms with boots and stepped outside. He closed the door again, afraid that some light might stream into the bunkhouse and awaken its occupants. He trudged away with his cumbersome load, circled the bunkhouse and found a clump of bushes some twenty feet away and dumped the entire load, guns, gun belts and boots into the bushes. He had spied a lariat hanging on a nail just inside the bunkhouse and returned for it.

A chorus of deep-throated snores greeted him. He grinned inwardly, removed the rope and went out again. He looped one end of the rope around the doorknob, backed away, playing out the rope until he had made a complete circuit of the bunkhouse, returned presently to the starting point, snapped the rope taut and swiftly knotted the loose end around the knob. He turned and looked over at the corral.

In the night light the smooth, worn bars shone white. There were probably a dozen horses at the far end of the corral. He strode over, lowered the bars and whistled softly. A horse neighed just as softly in answer and trotted forward. The other horses wheeled and followed at his heels. Marshall backed out of the corral. The horses jogged out. Marshall whacked one of them across the rump and the animal snorted angrily and reared up. A second slap sent the horse bounding away. His mates needed no urging. They raced after him, adding the increasing clatter of their hoof beats to his. Marshall whirled and raced away. He flattened out against the barn for at that moment the front door of the ranch-house was flung open and two figures appeared in the doorway.

MARSHALL, keeping close to the wall, made his way forward and halted again. The two figures, pistols gleaming in their hands, raced toward the corral. He dashed toward the house and reached the opened door and burst in. He collided with a third man who came toward him in the darkness.

"What . . . what is it, Boss?" the man demanded excitedly.

Marshall pushed him away roughly.

"Yuh clumsy fool!" he roared. "Cut off them two fellers down by th' corral!"

He shoved the man again, hard. The suddenness of his awakening plus the total darkness confused the man beyond belief. He staggered back, fell over a chair, scrambled to his feet and bolted out. In his excitement he failed to realize that it wasn't Greg Benton's voice that he had heard. That realization would probably come to him . . . afterwards . . . when he had had a chance to gather his wits together. Marshall heard him shout, heard a Colt roar once, then a second and finally a third time, heard guns answer.

Recalling from a previous 'visit' the layout of the house, Marshall experienced little difficulty in making his way about despite the darkness. He went from room to room, flinging open each door with a cry of "Molly!" but there was no answer. The rooms were empty. The last door along the hallway was locked. He hammered on it with his fist.

"Molly!" he cried again.

He heard an answering voice from behind the locked door.

"Git away fr'm th' door!" he cried. "I'm gonna bust it down!"

He stepped back and hurled himself at

the door. It flew open and banged loudly against the wall. Marshall went plunging into the room. He tripped over a chair and sprawled headlong on the floor and scrambled to his feet. Against the far wall was a bed and upon the bed lay a bound figure which struggled to sit up. It was Molly Lanning. He bounded to her side and bent over her.

"Yuh awright?" he demanded.

"Yes," she answered quickly. "My hands are tied to the bed-posts."

"Reckon we c'n fix that," he said briefly.

A knife flashed in his hand. In the darkness his big hand sought hers, found it and went past it.

"There yuh are."

He straightened up. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and tried to stand up. His hands shot out and gripped her shoulders and steadied her. She laughed lightly and looked up at him.

"Awright now?"

"Oh, yes," she answered. "Thank you."

"Then I reckon we'd better git goin'," he said quickly. "C'mon."

He caught her by the arm, led her to the door and into the hallway.

"I . . . I can't see a thing."

"That's awright. Just hang onter me," he answered.

He drew her closer to him. Her hand gripped his arm. Then they were going forward, through the darkness while she marveled at him.

"Careful there," he said suddenly.

She put out her hand. A chair stood in front of her. He guided her around it, led her on again and in another minute he was opening the rear door. She stepped past him and into the cool night air. They heard shouts from somewhere beyond them. Quickly she turned to him again but he caught her by the arm.

"We're gonna hafta run f'r it," he said quickly. "C'mon."

They dashed away from the house heading for the embankment. In another minute they reached the place where he had left the dangling rope. He caught it up.

"Git up on my back," he commanded.

"On your back?" she repeated.

"An' make it quick."

She stepped behind him.

"C'mon . . . put yo' arms 'round m' neck," he ordered.

She obeyed without comment or question.

"Hold on tight."

She felt him surge forward, felt the muscles in his back contract, tightened her grip, then her feet left the ground.

"Straddle me," he said through his teeth. "Like yuh was ridin' a horse."

Again she obeyed. Slowly they went upward, Marshall's feet and arms providing the necessary leverage. She clung to him desperately, until every muscle in her arms and back cried out in protest, then suddenly she felt herself being swung onto level ground again. She felt strangely limp and worn and swayed against him. He held her in his arms for a minute, against his heaving chest.

"Awright now?" he panted.

"Yes."

"Good girl."

She straightened up.

"Here . . . take this," he said, handing her his hat. She looked at it, then at him, questioningly. "Hold it in front uv yo' face. We're goin' through them bushes. Th' briars are shore bad."

She did as directed, gave him her hand again, bent low when he told her to and followed him through the brush and emerged presently among tall, shadow-shrouded trees. He whistled softly . . . whistled a second time. Somewhere in the darkness ahead of them a horse whinnied softly in reply. Marshall led her on again. They heard hoof beats presently and a big horse came out of the deep shadows to meet them and halted in front of them. Marshall patted the black's sleek neck. The horse rubbed his nose against his master's shoulder.

"Reckon I'll have m' hat now," Marshall said to Molly.

She handed it to him. He took it, put it on, bent and lifted her into the saddle, then he vaulted up behind her.

"Reckon yuh must be pretty well tuckered out," he said gravely.

She settled herself as comfortably as she could. The big black moved off. Molly closed her eyes for a moment, opened them again presently. Great, swirling shadows danced over the trail ahead of them, shot upward and over them. Molly gasped. She closed her eyes quickly and sank back. The steady, unbroken stride of the big horse lulled her to sleep. She stirred once and sighed and Marshall's left arm tightened around her. He looked skyward. Bright, twinkling stars smiled down at him.

CHAPTER XII

MONTE GLEASON yawned and shifted himself in the chair behind the big desk. He crossed his long legs, uncrossed them after a minute and climbed stiffly to his feet. He yawned again and stretched himself and strolled aimlessly around the office. He halted presently at the window, raised the blind and looked out. The street was silent, dark and deserted. Gleason frowned.

"Shore wish Marshall'd show up," he muttered to himself. He leaned against the window frame. "I shouldn'ta let 'im go alone. No tellin' what he mighta run up against."

He straightened up, turned away from the window when he heard hoof beats. He whirled and threw open the door. A horseman came jogging into view. Gleason stared hard for a moment, recognized the rider, then a grin broadened on his face.

"Doggone," he muttered admiringly. "There he is . . . larger'n life. Danged if he ain't got th' girl up there in front uv 'im, too."

He stepped out and halted, hands on hips, and waited. Presently the black pulled up at the door.

"Hi, Mister," Gleason said. "Somethin' I c'n do for yuh?"

Marshall grinned down at him.

"Nope. Looks mighty peaceful 'round here. Been this way since I left?"

The red-headed deputy snorted.

"Hell, yes. It's more like a graveyard than th' real thing," he replied. "What's that yuh got curled up against yuh?"

"This? Oh . . . just somethin' I picked up at Benton's place," Marshall said. "Look f'miliar to yuh?"

Gleason cocked his head and studied the face of the sleeping girl for a minute.

"Uh-huh. Looks a heap like th' Lanning girl."

"It is.

"That's what I figgered. Have 'ny trouble gittin' 'er away?"

"No . . . no more'n I could handle."

Gleason snorted again.

"Oh, yeah," he retorted. "I s'ppose Benton just handed 'er over to yuh soon's yuh showed up, didn't he?"

Marshall grinned.

"Wa-al, not exactly," he answered. "I'll tell yuh all about it later on. Right now I reckon I'd better git 'er home where she'll be a heap more comf'table than she is up here."

"Looks t' me like she's doin' awright where she is," Gleason said dryly.

Marshall wheeled the black.

"I'll be back d'rectly."

"Take yo' time," Gleason said airily. "I got all night. Just b'cause other folks've gone t' bed don't mean that I gotta. Shucks, I ain't th' least bit sleepy."

Marshall laughed lightly. The big horse plodded away. Gleason looked after them for a minute, saw Marshall halt his horse again presently in front of Molly's house, turned and trudged back into the office. He perched himself on the edge of the desk but his impatience drove him up from there and he sauntered outside again. A few minutes later he saw Marshall riding up the street again. The black clad man pulled up at the door, dismounted and followed him inside.

"C'llected more'n four hun'erd dollars while yuh were gone," Gleason began.

Marshall's eyebrows arched.

"No kiddin'?"

"Got th' money right there in th' desk . . . middle drawer. Fellers started droppin' in an' I just looked up that list o' yourn . . . told 'em what was what . . . an' hell . . . they paid up."

"Good work. Got 'em all now?"

"Nope. That feller that runs th' Golden Nugget . . . you know th' gent," Gleason said significantly, "he's doin' a heap o' yelpin' 'bout this license bus'ness. He's gittin' a heap too mouthy f'r his own good. Reckon he needs a little handlin' . . . savvy?'

Marshall nodded.

"Anybody else objectin'?"

"Yep . . . couple o' others. Mebbe we'd better go call on 'em t'morrer mornin' an' sorta git 'em t' see th' light?"

"An' how . . . an' we'll b'gin with th' Golden Nugget. We'll be on hand t' say good mornin' t' Mister Brown when he puts his key in th' lock. Nuthin' like helpin' him start th' day right."

Gleason grinned with anticipation.

"'Course."

ED BROWN strode briskly along the street. He halted presently in front of the Golden Nugget, fished in his pocket and finally produced a bunch of keys, selected one and inserted it in the lock in the door. He was about to turn the key

when he suddenly became aware of two men at his elbow. He gulped and swallowed hard.

"G'mornin', Mister Brown."

"Hope yuh slept well, Mister Brown."

"'Plannin' t' open?" one of the men asked. Brown recognized the voice as that of Marshall.

"Yuh musta f'rgot 'bout gittin' y'self that license," Marshall went on.

"Mister Brown don't aim t' git 'imself no license," Gleason said.

"'Course he does."

"Meb-be. Yest'd'y he kept tellin' th' hull world he wasn't goin' ter."

"But that was yest'd'y, y'know, an' this is t'day."

"That's right. Feller's li'ble t 'think one way one day an' another way th' next day."

"Uh-huh. Mebbe, Mister Gleason, if you were t' sorta amble back t' th' office, Mister Brown might d'cide that he wanted that license more'n anythin' else in th' world an' come see yuh 'bout s'pplyin' him with one."

"Yuh might have somethin' there, Sheriff," Gleason admitted. "'Course Mister Brown knows we got us a bran' new jail an' shucks, he don't look like th' kinda feller who'd wanna start wearin' it out f'r us just b'cause he f'rgot t' git 'imself a license."

"That's th' way I figger it, too."

"Wa-al," Gleason said gravely, "There ain't no sense in keepin' Mister Brown fr'm gittin' his license an' gittin' ready f'r business. I'll hustle right over t' th' office an' be ready f'r 'im when he gits there."

"So long, Mister Gleason."

"Be seein' yuh, Mister Marshall."

"See that Mister Brown gits good service. Th' best ain't none too good f'r him, y'know."

"Leave that t' me, Sheriff. I'm so plumb full o' p'liteness this mornin', I even tipped m' hat to a drunk layin' in a doorway up th' street."

Gleason turned and trudged off. Brown frowned, bit his lip, jerked the key out of the lock, wheeled and strode after him. Marshall grinned. He waited until he saw Brown follow Gleason into the office, then he turned and strolled along the street.

He halted shortly in front of a shack across whose dirty window the word 'Saloon' had been crudely printed. Marshall looked in. Three men were leaning against the bar while a giant, the biggest and surliest man Marshall had ever seen, was pouring them drinks. The black clad man sauntered inside. The giant looked up.

"Wa-al?"

"Where'll I find th' owner o' this place?" Marshall asked.

The man scowled.

"Yuh're lookin' at 'im. What d'yuh want?" he demanded gruffly.

"I'm th' Sheriff."

"Oh, yuh are, hey? Wa-al, Mister, if it's 'bout gittin' me t' buy one o' them there licenses fr'm yuh . . . nuthin' doin'. A red-headed feller was in here yest'd'y an' I told 'im t' stay th' hell away fr'm here. G'wan . . . git outta here b'fore I throw yuh out . . . tin badge 'n all."

Marshall's eyes glinted.

"That's big talk, Mister. Awright, you fellers . . . git out," he said curtly. "This place is closin'."

The big man's eyes blazed.

"Oh, yeah?"

He plunged around the bar.

"Awright, Mister," he said through his teeth. "You asked f'r this."

He rolled up his sleeves and suddenly lunged at the black clad man who simply side-stepped and drove a terrific left into the onrushing man's stomach. The big man's mouth flew open. Another lightning punch whirled through his guard and banged against his mouth. He blinked and roared and rushed again. A big fist exploded in his face and lifted him off his feet and deposited him on the floor.

Marshall looked down at him.

"How yuh makin' out?" he asked.

The big man, sitting on the floor, shook his dazed head. Blood surged out of his mouth and ran down his chin.

"Not s' good," he said shortly.

Marshall grinned.

"Figger yuh've had enough?" he asked.

"Hell, yes."

"Awright, then," Marshall said with finality. "Soon's yuh git yo' bearin's, yuh'd better lock up shop an' hustle over to th' office. Now that I've showed yuh a couple o' good reasons f'r fallin' inter line with th' others, yuh might's well git it over with."

He looked over at the three men who were staring at him wide-eyed.

"You fellers better git outta here," he said briefly.

One of the men gulped down his drink.

His mates slid past Marshall and rushed out. The third man circled around him, wheeled and fled. Marshall hitched up his belt, nodded to the big man on the floor, turned on his heel and marched out.

He strolled along the street which was now alive with passersby, spied a saloon close by and headed toward it. As he marched along, two men, their hands on their gun butts, stepped out of a doorway across the street. Both drew and fired at the black clad figure. The roar of gunfire filled the street. Marshall whirled. A window in a store directly behind him fell out with a deafening crash. Fire belched from his hips and blue smoke swirled up and around him.

One man, a step or two ahead of his companion, went down on his hands and knees, forced himself upright again, braced himself on wide-spread legs and levelled his gun a second time. His companion spied a buckboard drawn up at the curb, wheeled and dropped to his knees behind it and fired twice more. Marshall's heavy Colts blazed again in answer. The first man dropped his gun, staggered into the gutter and toppled over.

Marshall, his guns poised for another blast, dashed into the gutter, seeking to drive his surviving attacker into the open. A stocky man, his gun gleaming in his right hand, raced up the street. Marshall gave him a fleeting glance. It was Mike Burke. Then pounding along the sidewalk from the direction of the office came another figure. Marshall grinned. It was Monte Gleason, gun in hand, also anxious to take part in the fray.

Marshall fired once over the crouching man's head. Burke and Gleason fired at him. The man looked up, realized that he was cornered and backed away from the buckboard. Marshall deliberately held his fire. Burke's gun roared, once, twice, three times. The man dropped his gun, tottered and slid forward on his face. Mike rushed up, kicked the man's gun away and bent over him. He turned the man over on his back and stared down at him for a moment. Marshall and Gleason raced up. Burke looked up at them and grinned with satisfaction.

"Told you fellers I wanted another crack at 'n hombre with a long scar on his jaw," he said. "Remember?" He nodded toward the dead man at his feet. "There he is. Reckon him an' me 're square now."

CHAPTER XIII

IT WAS probably a week later that Marshall sat on the edge of Smith Jenkins' bed. The Ranger had recovered from his wounds and now he was able to sit up.

"Wa-al?" he demanded impatiently. "What's been goin' on 'round here?"

Marshall grinned.

"Oh . . . nuthin' uv importance," he answered casually. "Everythin's pretty much under control."

Jenkins snorted.

"Oh, yeah?" he retorted. "Thought Lodeville was such a tough nut t' crack that they needed a hull comp'ny o' Rangers t' git th' folks here t' r'spect th' law. How come it's changed all uv a sudden?"

Marshall laughed easily and shifted himself to a more comfortable position.

"Shucks," he answered lightly. "It's just gittin' folks t' see things yo' way. That's all there is to it."

Jenkins gave him an icy stare.

"Yuh don't say? I s'ppose if I was t' go look f'r this Benton hombre like's not I'd find him at prayer meetin', eh?"

"Nope. But I'm plannin' t' work on Mister Benton real soon. Anyway, t' b'gin at th' b'ginnin' . . . I hired me a couple o' deputies . . . danged good men too."

The Ranger frowned.

"One o' them wouldn't be a little runt?" he demanded. "Would he?"

"Uh-huh. Mike Burke's his name."

"Wa-al, whatever it is," Jenkins snapped. "Tell 'im t' stay th' hell away fr'm here. Every time I doze off, th' door opens an' when I look up there he is, lookin' at me. He gives me th' willies. What's he doin' 'round here?"

Marshall grinned.

"Guardin' yuh."

"Th' hell he is. I don't need no sawed-off deputy t' take care o' me. B'sides, every time I see 'im, he's eatin' somethin'. It's plumb disgustin' . . . 'specially since th' Doc won't let me eat more'n he says I c'n."

"C'n I go on now?"

"'Course," the Ranger snapped.

"Wa-al," Marshall continued. "We got us a bran' new jail now. Built it ourselves, too."

"That's fine. Where'd yuh git th' stuff t' build it with . . . steal it?"

"Nope," Marshall answered calmly. "We paid f'r it . . . with cash too."

Jenkins' eyebrows arched.

"Where in hell did yuh git th' cash?" he demanded.

"I'm comin' t' that. Made th' s'loon-keepers git themselves a license 'fore they could go on sellin' liquor."

"Yuh what?"

"Yuh heard me. C'llected 'bout eight hun'erd dollars in fees f'r licenses. Got this town on a real payin' basis now."

Jenkins sank back against his pillows.

"I'll be damned."

"I figgered yuh'd be."

Jenkins sat up again.

"Go on," he commanded. "Gimme th' rest while I'm still able t' take it."

"There ain't much more," Marshall replied. "Plannin' t' bring young Benton back here t'morrer . . . now that I figger we're able t' take good care o' him."

"What are yuh goin' do with 'im?" the Ranger asked.

"Make 'im stand trial f'r killin' th' Sheriff. Shucks, I can't afford t' let folks think they c'n kill a lawman an' git away with it, c'n I? First thing yuh know, some other feller might git th' idea he'd like t' git rid o' me."

Jenkins made a wry face.

"I'll bet there must be a hull heap o' fellers 'round here with that idea," he retorted. "Marshall, yuh'll shore be invitin' trouble if yuh go through with this idea o' yourn t' put young Benton on trial. His old man ain't th' kind t' take that without puttin' up a fight, y'know."

Marshall nodded.

"I'm expectin' trouble fr'm Greg Benton," he said shortly, "an' I figger that th' sooner we hook up, th' sooner Lodeville's really gonna settle down t' peaceful livin'."

"Uh-huh. On'y thing. . . yuh better git y'self well org'nized b'fore yuh tackle him. 'Course when th' cards are dealt out, it's gonna be him or you. Don't f'rgit that."

"I won't."

"There's one more thing, Marshall."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"You didn't want this job . . . I pushed yuh into it," Jenkins said quietly. "Yuh've a'ready done a-plenty here. I'll be up an' doin' in a couple o' days an' if yuh want to, yuh c'n move on an' nob'dy'll have a word t' say."

Marshall smiled, got to his feet and looked down at Jenkins.

"Mister," he said presently, "when I take on anythin' I see it through . . . right down to th' end."

He turned toward the door, nodded and opened the door.

"I'll be seein' yuh," he said over his shoulder. The door closed quietly behind him.

Jenkins grinned and sank down against the pillows.

LATE that night Marshall and Gleason locked up the office and rode out of town. They turned once and looked back, noted that the street was dark, silent and deserted, spurred their mounts and cantered away.

"Which way?" Gleason asked. "Through th' Pass?"

"Nope," Marshall answered. "Head north a while."

"An' then?"

"Swing 'round th' foot hills an' cut 'cross country an' foller th' stage road down inter Red River. It'll take longer but we're bound t' git where we're headed for . . . all in one piece."

Gleason ranged his mount alongside Marshall's.

"Y'know, yuh're gonna hafta do somethin' 'bout th' Pass," he said shortly, "one o' these days. Dave Barry, th' feller who uster drive th' stage b'tween Lodeville an' Red River was tellin' me th' other day that he's quit all t'gether. Says he ain't had a customer s' long, he's figgerin' on goin' inter somethin' else."

Marshall made no answer.

"Stevens ain't made a shipment t' th' bank since Lee Simms got killed off," the deputy continued. "Reckon by now he must be lousy with gold dust. First thing y'know, someb'dy's gonna git wise to it an' raid th' mine; then there'll shore be hell t' pay."

"I know . . . but Stevens is gonna hafta take care uv himself an' his dust a while longer. Clearin' out th' Pass is more'n we c'n handle right now, but we'll come to it once we git some other things outta th' way."

"Shore. Just thought I'd mention it . . . that's all."

They lapsed into silence then, each busy with his own thoughts, rode steadily north until they had left Lodeville miles behind

and south, then they swung west, cantered over level ground that was sometimes a bit higher in places and other times that dipped down sharply only to level off again after a stretch of some few hundred feet. But there were no sullen hills here, no nature-made places of ambuscade to watch and fear. Once or twice the black, anxious to run, lengthened his stride but each time Marshall jerked him back and the big horse snorted disgustedly and checked his pace.

Far to their left the rugged hills rose up from the ground into solid black masses. Here the country was open and a cooling breeze rustled through the thick grass and leaves. Shadows darted across the trail, swirled upward and scampered away before them.

Marshall looked up toward the distant horizon. It was indistinguishable in the night light, nothing but a vast blackness ahead. His thoughts went back over the weeks . . . the long, eventful weeks since he had started for California . . . the crowded weeks which had delayed his progress westward. He grinned when he reviewed them. He even wondered now if he would ever get there. There was always something arising to claim his time and attention. Finally, he shrugged his shoulder. There wasn't any use in thinking about California now, not with so much work yet to be done in Lodeville.

"It's funny, y'know," he heard Gleason say.

He looked up.

"What is?" he asked.

"Why, me bein' a lawm'n," Gleason explained.

"Oh, I dunno," Marshall countered. "Some fellers're just made t' order f'r that kind o' work an' you look like that kind o' feller."

Gleason laughed.

"You don't know me, Mister," he said lightly. "Y'know, b'fore I come here, I worked up in Montana. Hell, if th' folks back there knew what I was doin' now, they'd die a-laughin'. B'tween you an' me, Marshall, it was on account o' me that th' Sheriff o' my home town had a job."

"Reckon that holds good f'r me, too."

"That a fact?"

"Uh-huh. Still, when yuh think back . . . those days seem s' far away . . . almost like a dream . . . don't they? Mebbe it's b'cause s' much has happened since then."

"S'ppose so."

"'Course. That's what I like 'bout th' West. Each place . . . each town's so far away fr'm th' next . . . they're like sep'rate worlds. What yuh do in one place don't allus go against yuh in th' next place . . . sorta lets yuh start fresh an' clean all over again. Back East it ain't like that. Yo' reputation makes th' rounds an' hits th' towns all around yuh an' first thing yuh know th' law's after yuh an' yuh're on th' dodge. It's on'y when yuh git West that things quiet down an' yuh git another chance t' git yo' breath."

THEY were silent again for a time but again it was Gleason who spoke first.

"What are yuh plannin' t' do after yuh git Lodeville straightened out?" he asked.

Marshall laughed lightly.

"Yuh're gittin' ahead o' y'self, ain'tcha?" he replied. "'Specially since we've on'y just started whippin' things inter shape?"

Gleason scoffed openly.

"Hell . . . you'll handle this thing awright. I c'n see that much plain as day. But when yuh're finished . . . what then?"

"Keep goin' like I was . . . toward California."

"California, eh?"

"Uh-huh."

"That's pretty far off, ain't it?"

"Yeah . . . reckon it is . . . fr'm here. It won't be once I git goin' again."

"Whatcha plannin' t' do' out there?' Gleason asked.

"Oh . . . I dunno. Reckon I'll figger that part out when I git there an' see what's doin' there. What int'rests me most 'bout California is that it's new country an' wide open an' a feller c'n really move around without bumpin' inter someb'dy. It's gittin' a mite crowded 'round these parts a'ready. Notice it?"

Gleason laughed.

"Nope . . . can't say that I have. As f'r me, crowds ain't th' worst thing. I like folks . . . like t' have 'em close by . . . like t' know that I ain't alone. B'sides, I aim t' settle down soon an' since I ain't th' pioneerin' kind I'm willin' t' move into a place that's a'ready established an' growin'."

"Reckon that's what makes us diff'rent," Marshall said. "Somehow I ain't th' kind t' stay put f'r long. I git tired o' th'

same thing after a while . . . an' I gotta git goin' again."

Gleason eyed him curiously.

"But yuh gotta settle down some time, y'know. Shucks, no man wants t' live on th' move all th' time. Most everyone wants things . . . like yo' own place an' mebbe a wife an' kids," he said doggedly. "You ain't no diff'rent . . . no, sir."

"Dunno, Gleason. Sometimes I want 'em an' sometimes I don't. It's somethin' deep down inside o' me, mebbe it's part o' me by now . . . somethin' that makes me restless an' makes me want t' go on an' on. When I git t' feelin' that way, b'lieve me, I'm doggoned glad that I ain't tied t' anythin' . . . land, woman or kids. It'd be tough on me an' a heap tougher on them."

"But in th' end . . . where'll yuh wind up?" Gleason persisted.

"Dunno th' answer t' that one. Reckon it's b'cause I'm th' kind that lives fr'm day t' day with nary a thought 'bout th' future."

Gleason grunted and straightened up again in his saddle. Conversation died away completely. In silence they rode on through the night, swung south again presently. Behind them, to the left, the hills and the Pass faded away into black nothingness. An hour later they followed the stage road into Red River. The town was dark and deserted.

"Looks like one o' them sunrise t' sundown places," Gleason said with a grin as they jogged along the single street. "It's so doggoned quiet I'll bet nobody ever strays outdoors after dark."

"Don't kid y'self," Marshall answered quickly. "There's plenty doin' here on'y th' law's got a good grip on things an' keeps 'em in check."

"Where's th' Sheriff's office?"

"Down th' street a ways. See that light down there?"

"Uh-huh. That it?"

"Yep."

They rode on and pulled up presently in front of the Sheriff's office and dismounted. A door opened as they strode toward it and a burly figure appeared in the doorway.

"Howdy, Gents."

"Howdy."

Marshall stepped ahead of Gleason.

"How are yuh, Mullens?"

"Wa-al, I'll be doggoned . . . Marshall! So yuh're still around, eh?"

"Shore am. Oh . . . This is Monte Gleason . . . my deputy . . . Sheriff Mullens."

"Glad t' know yuh, Gleason."

"Glad t' know you, Sheriff."

Mullens swung the door wide.

"Step inside, gents an' make y'selves comfortable. S'ppose yuh begin by tellin' me what brings yuh here this time o' night?"

Marshall and Gleason entered. The door closed behind them.

CHAPTER XIV

AT MARSHALL'S instance Sheriff Mullens trudged out of the office and when he returned some twenty minutes later he announced with a grin that he had recruited eight good men for temporary employment in Lodeville's service. All of them, he added, had seen service some time or other as deputies and all were equally handy with guns and fists.

"Swell," Marshall said.

"They're outside," Mullens continued, nodding his thanks to him. "They're mounted an' armed an' ready t' go soon's you fellers are. Had t' rout 'em outta bed but all uv 'em jumped at th' chance t' pick up a few extra dollars an' mebbe a little excitement on th' side."

"I'm shore obliged to yuh, Mullens," Marshall said. "Dunno what I'da done without yuh."

"Shucks," Mullens said quickly. "I didn't do no more'n you'da done f'r me if it'da been me callin' on you f'r help. So f'rgit it. Oh, yeah . . . Gleason . . . there's a bunch o' special deputies' badges in that there drawer. Yeah . . . that's it. Yank it hard . . . it gits stuck sometimes. They in there? Good. Take 'em. When yuh git things t' rights over t' Lodeville, yuh c'n r'turn 'em. Oh, yeah . . . th' pris'ner."

"Git 'im, willya?" Marshall asked.

"Shore," Mullens replied.

He sauntered past them, went through a door toward the rear and disappeared along a corridor. Somewhere beyond the office they heard another door open, then they heard Mullens' voice. They heard footsteps presently, approaching the office, then Mullens reappeared, leading a rather drowsy but considerably startled young man. It was Curt Benton, attired in soiled trous-

ers and shirt that were far too large for him and wearing a pair of badly battered boots. The youth halted abruptly in the doorway, blinked in the light and stared first at Marshall then at Gleason. Mullens nudged him on.

"Go 'head, yuh polecat," Mullens said curtly. "Git in there."

He gave Curt a push and the youth stumbled forward and halted again. Gleason sauntered forward and eyed him critically. The youth flushed under his probing eyes.

"So this is th' ornery critter that killed Simms, eh?" Gleason asked. "Musta done it when Simms wasn't lookin'."

Marshall hitched up his belt.

"Reckon we'd better git goin'," he announced. "So long, Mullens an' thanks again." He looked at young Benton. "C'mon, you."

Curt paled.

"Where . . . where're we goin'?" he asked, falteringly, wide-eyed.

Gleason grinned coldly.

"We're goin' bye-bye."

The youth shrank back.

"I won't go!" he cried. "I won't go!"

Gleason frowned with annoyance.

"Yuh don't sing so pretty now, yuh murderin' yaller pup," he said scornfully. "Git goin' 'less yuh want me t' boot yuh clear through that there door."

Marshall opened the street door. A double line of horsemen waited outside. Some of the riders turned in their saddles and looked at him. Gleason gripped Curt by the arm and shoved him out. In the doorway the youth fought to break the deputy's hold on him but Gleason was too annoyed to be denied. Mullens followed them outside.

"I'm lendin' yuh that horse," he called to Marshall, nodding toward a saddled horse idling at the curb near the black and Gleason's mount. "It's f'r that young polecat."

Marshall turned and nodded.

"I'll take good care o' both o' them," he answered.

Gleason led Curt forward to the waiting horse.

"Git aboard," he said curtly.

Marshall mounted and edged the black closer.

"C'mon, Benton," he said coldly. "Do's yuh're told 'less yuh'd rather walk."

Curt mumbled something under his breath and reached for the reins but Gleason jerked them away. Curt gave him a murderous glare, caught hold of the saddlehorn and pulled himself up into the saddle. If he had any plans for a sudden bolting they were swiftly frustrated for the black swung over in front of him, completely blocking his path. Gleason climbed into his saddle.

"Awright . . . let's go," Marshall called over his shoulder.

The party moved off. Mullens, idling patiently in the doorway, watched them round the corner, then he turned and closed the door behind him.

RED RIVER faded away in the darkness. With Marshall riding ahead and Gleason and Curt swinging along behind him and the newly-hired 'special deputies' bringing up the rear, the party quickened its pace and followed the stage road out of town. A half-hour's ride through the open country brought them to a point within a mile of the Pass and they swung away abruptly and headed north until the black masses of the rugged summits of the Pass fell away behind them and faded out completely. Marshall turned frequently in his saddle and looked back over the troop of horsemen strung out behind him. Curt looked around once or twice and it finally brought a caustic snort from the watchful Gleason.

"Never mind lookin' back," the redheaded deputy said dryly. "Poppa ain't comin' f'r yuh. This is one time, Mister, when yuh got inter somethin' by y'self an' yuh're gonna see it right through t' th' end . . . by y'self."

The youth glared at him resentfully but he made no answer, settled himself again in his saddle and stared straight ahead. The black lengthened his stride and the other horses, taking their cue from him, followed suit. Through the silent, shadow-shrouded flatlands they went, swung eastward presently and cut across country. They cantered on in silence, nothing but the rhythmic clatter of hoofs interrupting the stillness of the night. Finally, they wheeled and rode south again. It was probably an hour later that they loped into Lodeville, along the rutted, dark and deserted street. Marshall's keen eyes probed every doorway along the street, probing the shadows for signs of humans, humans with rifles and Colts with which to bring him Benton's answer.

But there was one doorway which he passed by, perhaps inadvertently. After the troop had halted in front of the office, a lone figure slipped out of the shadowy fastness of an empty building far up the street, reached the corner and raced away. A minute later a lone horseman, lashing his mount with the loose ends of his reins, galloped away toward the south.

Marshall dismounted.

"Awright, men," he called. "Git down."

Gleason slid to the ground.

"That means you too, Benton," he said briefly.

The Red River men climbed out of their saddles. Curt dismounted slowly. Gleason stepped close to him, caught him by the arm and led him to the door. Marshall unlocked it and stepped back. Gleason led the prisoner inside. A moment later the lamp on the Judge's desk flared into light.

"Take yo' horses 'round th' back," Marshall instructed the new men.

He watched them lead their horses down the alley alongside the office. Minutes later they straggled back, each man carrying his rifle. Marshall led them inside. Gleason was just closing the rear door.

"Put 'im t' bed?" Marshall asked.

The deputy grinned.

"Even tucked 'im in," he answered. "Bet that's a heap more'n Poppa uster do f'r 'im."

Marshall turned to the others.

"There's gonna be plenty o' fireworks round here," he began, "mebbe even sooner'n we expect, so we might's well git set f'r them. B'ginnin' right now, two uv yuh'll stand guard 'round th' back. Yuh'll be r'lieved in th' mornin'."

"How 'bout a couple o' them in here too?" Gleason asked.

"I'm comin' t' that. Two uv yuh'll stay in here till mornin'. Now who'll take th' outside?"

"Reckon yuh c'n gimme that job," a burly man said. He turned to the man on his left. "How 'bout joinin' me, Sam?"

"Right with yuh," the man replied.

"Awright," Marshall said. "Keep yo' eyes peeled f'r anythin' that don't look just right. Go 'head."

The two men, the burly one in the lead, wheeled and sauntered out. A tall fellow caught Marshall's eye.

"Yeah?"

"How 'bout me an' Tim," the man asked, nodding toward the man beside him, "doin' duty here?"

"S'awright with me," Marshall replied. "Gleason'll show you other fellers where yuh c'n sleep. Take care o' them, willya, Monte?"

"Yuh bet."

Gleason led the others out through the rear door. Marshall had had the former lean-to behind the office torn down and in its place a large, solidly-walled structure containing eight 'cells' had been erected. They were more like tiny rooms than cells for their doors were slatted instead of barred. A cot and a chair completed each room's furnishings. The only means of entrance or exit was through the office.

GLEASON returned shortly.

"Reckon everythin's in order f'r t'night," he reported to Marshall.

The latter nodded.

"Good. Then s'ppose you turn in, too," he suggested.

"What about you? Yuh got 'nythin' against yo' bed?" Gleason asked.

"I ain't sleepy," Marshall replied. "You go 'head."

Gleason looked over at the two men who had volunteered to do the 'hitch' inside the office.

"Help y'selves t' some chairs," he said. "That'll be a heap better'n standin'."

The men did as directed. They carried chairs away from the wall and placed them, one near the door, the other beside the window, seated themselves and laid their rifles across their knees. Gleason trudged to the rear. Marshall sauntered to the window and looked out. He hitched up his belt.

"I'll be back d'rectly," he said to the man nearest the door. "Keep an eye on things."

He strode out, halted and looked up and down the street, caught up the black's reins and led him down the alley to the rear. A burly figure, rifle in hand and ready, sauntered forward, recognized him and lowered his rifle.

"Want me t' unsaddle 'im?" the man asked.

"Will yuh?"

"Shore."

Marshall handed him the reins, turned and retraced his steps to the street. He looked down the street toward Molly Lanning's house. It was darkened. He strolled down the street and crossed over. A stocky

figure, rifle in hand, arose from the shadows and sauntered forward. It was Mike Burke.

"'Lo, Boss," he said. "Lookin' f'r me?"

"No, not exactly. Figgered you were somewhere's 'round. Everythin' awright?"

"Hell, yes," Burke answered quickly. "S-ay, Boss . . . ain't yuh never gonna gimme somethin' t' do b'side stan' guard here? Doggone it, all I'm doin' is eatin'. Miss Lannin' is shore swell, but she must think I'm Gleason. He's th' one that needs fattenin' up . . . not me."

Marshall laughed.

"Go on over t' th' office," he said, "an' turn in. I'll take over f'r yuh here."

"Whatever yuh say. Oh, yeah . . . Miss Lannin's still up. She's in th' kitchen . . . readin'. Mebbe if yuh was t' go in an' ask, real nice-like, she might rustle yuh up a hunk o' that there choc'late cake she's got. Boy, c'n she make it!"

"Choc'late cake, eh? Don't tell Gleason 'bout it. He'll think yuh're gittin' soft."

"Huh!" Burke snorted. "Not that long drink o' water. He'd come a'runnin' f'r it with his tongue hangin' out. Wa-al, g'night."

"G'night, Burke . . . an' oh, yeah . . . yuh'll find some new deputies 'round th' office. Picked 'em up over t' Red River."

Burke nodded, lowered his rifle and sauntered away. Marshall strode to the door, reached for the knob but the door opened from the inside. Molly Lanning stood in the doorway.

"Hello. Don't yuh ever go t' bed?" he asked.

"Hello. Do you?" she countered.

His even teeth flashed in a grin.

"Shore . . . sometimes."

"Would you like some coffee?" she asked.

"Wa-al, now . . . that d'pends. Got somethin' t' go with it?" he countered.

"There were some biscuits left over from supper," she answered. "Would they do?"

"Biscuits?" he repeated in a shocked if not incredulous voice. "Huh! Choc'late cake f'r Burke an' biscuits f'r me! Reckon I know how I stand 'round here."

Molly laughed softly.

"Oh . . . so you've heard about the cake, have you? Well, all right then. . . chocolate cake it shall be. Come on."

She opened the door wide. He stepped inside.

"How's Jenkins?" he asked.

"Doing very nicely, the doctor says. He's asleep now. We mustn't wake him."

Marshall grinned.

"I should say not. There wouldn't be 'nough cake t' go 'round then."

She closed the door quietly and led him through the darkened rooms to the kitchen at the rear.

CHAPTER XV

WORD that Curt Benton had been returned to Lodeville and that he had been lodged in the new jail-house pending trial for the killing of Lee Simms made the circuit of the saloons. Instantly it became the chief, if not the sole topic of conversation among the citizens who appeared at their favorite bars for their customary 'eye openers.' In the Pot o' Gold the black-haired Mike Finneran stopped wiping glasses to give his undivided attention to the discussion of the subject at his bar.

"All I gotta say is," a burly man said with finality, "Greg Benton ain't th' kind o' hombre t' let that kid o' his swing. Mark m'words."

"Uh-huh," another man said, reached for his glass, drained it and shuddered and put the glass down again.

"Gotta git 'im c'nvicted first, y'know," a third man remarked, "b'fore yuh c'n hang 'im. That's still th' way they do it, ain't it?"

"'Course," the second man snapped and downed a glass of beer.

"I'm damned if I c'n name yuh even three men, let alone six," the burly man began again, "who'd be willin' t' sit on Curt's jury."

The second man nodded and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"From th' looks o' things," he said shortly, "Marshall's gonna hafta use some o' them Red River fellers he brung over f'r deputies t' fill up th' jury box. Nob'dy in this lop-eared town'll be fool enough t' take th' job."

The third man grinned a toothless grin and tapped his chest with a grimy finger.

"Here's one feller that ain't gonna take it," he said. "All I'm gonna take is 'nother drink."

He reached for the bottle and filled his glass.

"You ain't said even one word yet,

Mike," the burly man began, eyeing the saloonkeeper.

Finneran smiled.

"What is there t' say? You fellers've said it all, leastways, as far's I c'n see," he replied. "On'y thing is that Marshall'll git his jury . . . yuh c'n bet on it. An' f'r my money, Curt Benton's good as hung right now."

The burly man frowned.

"You gonna sit on th' jury?" he asked.

Finneran smiled again.

"I ain't been asked. But if I am asked . . . like's not I'll accommodate 'em."

The toothless man drained his glass and set it down upon the bar. He scowled and eyed Finneran sharply.

"Yuh must be plumb tired o' livin', Mike," he said curtly. "You allus uster be pretty level-headed. What's got inter yuh all uv a sudden?"

"I'm lookin' ahead," Finneran answered. "I c'n see th' writin' on th' wall, even if you fellers can't. Benton's done 'round these parts. Marshall's brought law'n order t' Lodeville an' th' soòner you fellers git wise to it, th' better off yuh'll be."

The man shook his head.

"Long's Greg Benton's alive," he said doggedly, "he'll run Lodeville."

Finneran smiled patiently.

"Yeah . . . fr'm a distance. Where's he been all this time that Marshall's been doin' things 'round here? If he's runnin' this town why ain't he showed up here since Marshall an' Jenkins threw 'im out? Answer me that, Mister, but make yo' answer good so's I c'n enjoy it."

SMITH JENKINS shifted himself heavily in the big armchair in Molly Lanning's parlor, grimaced and finally settled himself and looked up again. Marshall watched him patiently. The Ranger shook his head.

"Dunno, Marshall," he began presently. "Dunno but yuh're bitin' off more'n yuh c'n chew. 'Course I'm with yuh . . . all th' way too, no matter what happens . . . on'y I was hopin' yuh'd take it easy . . . say, till yuh had a better grip on things 'round here."

"Couldn't have expected yuh t' see this thing th' way I do," Marshall answered. "Till I show 'em that law'n order are here f'r keeps nuthin' I c'n do will c'nvince 'em that they gotta pay attention to them. I'm after a showdown. I'm gonna have it an' I'm gonna win out. If I don't . . . I ain't big enough f'r th' job."

Jenkins frowned.

"R'member what yuh said when I told yuh that I was plannin' t' tax th' s'loonkeepers? Yuh said I was loco. Wa-al, they paid f'r their licenses, so mebbe I ain't so loco after all."

The Ranger gestured impatiently.

"But, doggone it . . . this is diff'rent. Mebbe Benton was lettin' yuh run along figgerin' yuh'd trip y'self up sooner or later. Awright, he guessed wrong. Now he don't hafta play that way. This is his kid yuh're plannin' t' try . . . it's his life yuh're aimin' t' snuff out with a rope."

"An'?"

"He'll fight yuh all along th' line to th' gallows, Marshall," Jenkins continued, "right down t' th' end."

"I'm expectin' him ter," Marshall answered calmly. "What you don't savvy, Jenkins, is that it ain't just Curt Benton. It's . . . it's th' principle o' th' thing. Hangin' Curt ain't gonna give me 'ny satisfaction. I gotta go through with it t' bring on th' showdown. Once an' f'r all we gotta know whether th' law's runnin' Lodeville or if Greg Benton's doin' it."

The Ranger frowned.

"Wa-al, I shoved yuh inter this thing, so whether yuh're right or wrong I'm seein' it out with yuh. Where d'yuh figger t' git six men willin' t' try Curt?"

"Oh, I'll git 'em awright."

"In spite o' th' fact that if they c'nvict Curt their lives won't be worth a tin dime?" Jenkins demanded.

The black clad man smiled easily.

"I've still got a couple o' money cards up my sleeve," he said quietly. "This ain't th' first game o' double dealin' I've sat in on. S'ppose yuh quit worryin' 'bout those things an' leave 'em t' me?"

The Ranger grunted.

"Awright, I will. What d'yuh want me t' do?" he asked.

"I'm countin' on you t' come inter court like an ord'nary citizen an' tell yo' story. That's all."

"I'll be there."

Marshall nodded, sauntered to the door, opened it and looked back at Jenkins over his shoulder.

"Take it easy," he said.

Jenkins' lip curled.

"That's all I've been doin' since I got plugged," he retorted. "I'm so damned fed

up with layin' 'round . . . if I don't git outta here pronto, I won't be r'sponsible f'r anythin'. Yuh better take it easy y'self. Greg Benton'd like nuthin' better than t' blast yuh."

Marshall grinned again.

"It's a free country . . . so he c'n try . . . if he's got enough guts. All I gotta say is that he'd better not miss. So long."

He went out, closed the door behind him. Molly came into the room, halted in the doorway.

"Who was that?" she asked.

Jenkins frowned.

"Marshall," he answered briefly.

She eyed him curiously.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked.

The Ranger's lip curled again.

" 'Course not. Whatever gave yuh that idea?" he demanded.

"Nothing. I was just wondering, that's all."

He avoided her eyes.

"S-ay, where'n blazes is that gun belt o' mine?" he asked. "Yuh seen it around?"

"I have it."

"Yuh have, eh? How'd yuh like t' git it f'r me? I got 'n idea I'm gonna need it . . . mebbe even sooner'n I've been figgerin'. I wanna start gittin' th' feel uv it again."

Her face paled suddenly.

"Then . . . there is . . . something wrong."

Jenkins snorted.

"There's a hull heap o' things wrong . . . if yuh must know. Marshall's puttin' young Benton on trial f'r killin' Lee Simms. If that don't add up ter trouble my name ain't what I've been callin' m'self."

"You mean . . . Greg Benton will do something?" she asked.

" 'Course. Curt's his son, ain't he? Yuh don't s'ppose Greg's gonna let th' kid swing without doin' all he c'n t' git Curt outta th' mess, do yuh?"

"But, surely . . Marshall must be aware of that," she said quickly.

"He is," Jenkins retorted. "But d'yuh think f't a minute that he's worryin' about it? Heck, no. Th' danged fool shore loves trouble an' excitement. Sometimes I git th' idea that he goes out uv 'is way t' find 'em. That's a fact."

She smiled patiently.

"He seems quite able to handle them though . . . doesn't he? . . . when they come along?"

He nodded begrudgingly.

"Yeah . . . I s'ppose so." Then he added quickly. "Now don't git me wrong. I'd rather have him on my side than anyone else I know uv. When the chips are down . . . that iron nerve o' his an' uv course them two big Colts he totes gener'lly make th' diff'rence b'tween winnin' an' losin'."

"You've known him a long time, haven't you?" she asked.

"Uh-huh . . . man an' boy."

"Has he always been like that . . . I mean so utterly unafraid?"

"Yeah . . . reckon he has. Sometimes . . . just f'r a change y' know . . . I wish he'd git scared o' somethin' but shucks . . . he never does," he answered.

She looked away for a moment.

"He . . . he's very good looking, isn't he?"

"Who . . . Marshall? Oh . . . I dunno that I'd call 'im that. 'Course mebbe I've never noticed it. Reckon men don't pay much attention t' other fellers' looks. There's more important things. Still, I s'ppose he ain't what yuh'd call hard on women's eyes. He mustn't be 'cause far back's I c'n r'member, women allus seemed t' take more'n just a passin' int'rest in him." He grinned fleetingly. "Reckon they musta seen somethin' there that I didn't."

She was silent for a brief moment.

"And he . . . did he take an interest in them?" she asked presently.

Jenkins shook his head.

"Not that yuh could notice. An' there were some mighty fine lookin' ones among 'em too . . . one in partic'lar. She was plumb loco 'bout him but it didn't git 'er nowheres with 'im. I guess Marshall ain't what yuh'd call susceptible t' charm. He's too . . . ."

"I'll get your gun belt now," she said quickly, interrupting him.

He looked up at her sharply.

"Huh? Oh . . . awright."

She turned and went out. A frown deepened over his face.

"Now what d'yuh make o' that?" he muttered, half aloud. "One minute she was all int'rest in Marshall . . . then just like that . . . she wasn't 'nymore. Doggone women anyway. I never did savvy 'em . . . this one included."

CHAPTER XVI

MONTE GLEASON came striding into the office. He kicked the door shut, glanced at the two guards and trudged forward to the desk. Marshall looked up. Monte halted in front of him, shoved his hat back from his eyes, perched himself on the edge of the desk.

"Wa-al?" Marshall asked. "Everythin' awright?"

The deputy nodded.

" 'Course."

He got to his feet again presently, dragged a chair away from the wall, placed it close to the desk and seated himself. He eyed Marshall curiously for a moment.

"What's botherin' yuh?" he asked. "Yuh're plumb jittery t'night. That ain't a-tall like yuh."

Marshall frowned.

"Don't pay 'ny attention t' me, Monte," he answered. "I dunno what it is . . . 'cept mebbe that I've got th' damnedest feelin' that somethin's gonna pop t'night."

Gleason grunted.

"Awright . . . let it. We c'n handle it. There're ten uv us here an' with that many we oughta be able t' take anythin' that anybody c'n hand out . . . even Benton . . . 'less uv course he's r'cruited a reg'lar army an' that ain't likely."

"Yeah . . . I s'ppose yuh're right. Go 'head . . . turn in."

"I'm aimin' to . . 'less yuh'd rather have me stick around f'r a while longer."

"Nope . . . tain't necessary."

Gleason climbed to his feet, spun the chair away from the desk and hitched up his belt.

"Might be a good idea I s'ppose t' lay out a couple o' rifles just in case," he said presently.

The black clad man nodded.

"Might be at that."

Gleason strode past him, went out the rear door. He returned shortly carrying two rifles and laid them on top of the desk.

"There yuh are . . . loaded an' ready f'r blastin'," he announced.

"Thanks."

The red-headed deputy grinned.

"Just a part o' th' service," he said with a wave of his hand. "I'll be seein' yuh . . . an' I shore hope it won't be b'fore mornin'. Th' way I feel right now I could sleep f'r a week. G'night."

"G'night, Monte."

Gleason nodded to the two guards who nodded back. He tramped out the rear door. Marshall hitched up his belt and sauntered forward. One of the guards . . burly Bill Long . . . looked up.

"How 'bout openin' th' door f'r a spell, Boss?" he asked. "It's kinda stuffy in here t'night. Notice it?"

"Yeah . . . open 'er up."

Long arose stiffly, laid his rifle across his chair, stretched himself and opened the door. He stood in the doorway for a moment, a big, broad-shouldered man, sucking in the cool, night air noisily. He turned and grinned at his partner, Tim Kelly.

"A-h . . . that shore feels good. C'mon, Tim . . . git a breath o' this. It'll do yuh good."

He turned again and stepped outside, looked up at the blue, star-lit sky. Kelly arose and sauntered toward the door. Suddenly a rifle cracked. Kelly whirled away from the door. They heard the burly Long cry out, saw him turn slowly on buckling legs. Marshall bounded forward, shouldering Kelly out of the way and caught the sagging Long in his arms.

"Douse th' light!" he cried.

Kelly plunged toward the desk, knocked the lamp to the floor with a sweep of his hand. When he turned away from the desk Marshall was dragging Long inside. He rushed forward and slammed the door.

"Git Gleason an' th' others!" Marshall ordered.

Kelly dashed past him toward the rear door. Marshall lowered the limp guard to the floor, whipped out his guns and crawled to the window, crouched down and looked out. His keen, probing eyes swept the darkened street. He thought he detected a movement in a shadow-shrouded doorway across the street and sent a stream of bullets into it. Someone crowded against him. He turned slightly. It was Gleason.

"What is it?" the deputy demanded.

A raised gun gleamed in his hand.

"Benton, most likely," Marshall answered. "Long's plugged . . . bad I think. He's layin' over near th' wall. Git Kelly t' give yuh a hand an' take 'im inter th' back room an' see what yuh c'n do f'r 'im."

Gleason crawled away. Marshall studied a shadow for a moment and fired at it. The 'shadow' arose, staggered out of a darkened doorway, swayed and toppled into the

gutter. Marshall grunted. Gleason came crawling back to him.

"Yeah?"

"Long's dead," the deputy said briefly. He raised his gun again. "See 'nythin'?"

"Yeah. Got one feller. He's layin' in th' gutter . . . down th' street a-ways. See 'im?"

Gleason looked hard.

"Oh, yeah. He th' on'y one yuh seen so far?" he asked.

"Nope. Watch them doorways across th' street an' yuh'll see s'more. Take that there place opposite us. Blacker'n all hell ain't it . . . an' full o' shadows? Wa-al, them shadows ain't just ord'nary shadows They're men . . . Benton's men."

THEY heard a quick shuffling of feet behind them. Both turned and looked. Tall forms, the Red River men, rifles in their hands, crowded up to them.

"What'll I do with 'em?" Gleason asked.

"Send 'em up t' th' roof," Marshall replied.

"Right."

Gleason climbed to his feet.

"Awright, men . . . foller me."

The special deputies turned and followed him out through the rear door. With an eye to an eventuality such as this one, Marshall had had a skylight built in a distant corner of the 'cell block.' In an effort to conceal the means of reaching it, he had a closet built around a sturdy ladder that ran from the floor to the roof.

Now, with a handful of riflemen posted on the roof from which vantage point they could easily sweep the doorways and roofs opposite the office, he could concentrate upon the street itself. A dark figure, rifle in hand, crouched down beside him. It was Tim Kelly.

"How 'bout me takin' a hand in this, Boss?" he asked. "I'd shore like t' git th' ornery critter who plugged Bill."

"Help y'self," Marshall answered. "On'y watch y'self. After yuh shoot . . . pull away fr'm th' window so's they can't spot yuh."

"Uh-huh."

Marshall's gun flamed suddenly. A window across the street fell out with a deafening clatter. Kelly's rifle roared a moment later and a dark figure staggered into the street, fell to his knees and huddled there a moment. Kelly fired a second time and the man pitched forward on his face.

"Reckon that hellion'll never amount t' much," he gritted through his teeth.

"Nope . . . he's done f'r."

Gleason came to join them presently. He knelt down beside Marshall.

"Yuh'll hear them blastin' in a minute," he announced.

Hardly had he finished speaking when a roar of rifle fire burst from the roof above them. Windows crashed and fell on the opposite sidewalk with a deafening din. The rifles cracked a second time and the vibration seemed to rock the building. Gleason grinned.

"Boy," he said gleefully. "Even if they don't actu'lly hit 'ny o' them polecats . . . th' racket fr'm their rifles'll shore prove annoyin' an' mebbe discouragin' t' them fellers over there."

Now the hidden attackers opened fire in earnest. Guns flamed and belched from the darkened doorways across the street. Aiming at the flashes of the thundering guns, the three men crouching at the window added their own fire to the deafening din. Bullets sprayed and spattered the front of the building, the door and shattered the raised window. The crouching men threw themselves face downward on the floor and crawled away to shake off the glass fragments, then they returned and resumed firing. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the crashing gun fire slackened and presently ceased altogether.

"Boy," Gleason said aloud, moping his face with his sleeve. "That was somethin', wasn't it?"

"Shore was," Kelly said.

"Better load up again pronto," Marshall instructed. "Monte . . . mebbe we oughta git them rifles over here too."

"Yeah . . . just in case," Gleason said dryly.

He arose and plodded away, cursed when he slipped on some pieces of glass. He returned after a minute and handed a rifle to Marshall, and squatted down on his heels. They heard a crash of rifle fire far down the street. Gleason, reloading his sixgun, looked up sharply.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Sounds t' me like they've opened up on Molly's house," Marshall answered.

He holstered his guns, pushed the rifle aside and climbed to his feet.

"Wait a minute. Where yuh goin'?" Gleason demanded.

"Gonna give Burke a hand," Marshall

said casually. "You fellers don't need me here . . . yuh c'n handle it by y'selves. Just r'member t' keep yo' eyes peeled so's they don't git a chance t' slip past yuh an' rush them two fellers 'round th' back."

"How'n blazes d'yuh expect t' reach Burke?" Gleason went on. "Th' minute yuh step outside yuh'll be blasted t' hell an' back."

Marshall scoffed.

"I'm ashamed o' yuh, Monte," he said.

"Huh? Oh . . . I git th' idea. Aimin' t' hop off th' roof an' work yo' way along th' back . . . right?"

"Right. See you fellers later on."

He wheeled and strode away. The door closed behind him presently.

"He's plenty awright," Kelly said quietly. "Ain't he?"

Gleason grunted.

"He shore is," he answered. "Marshall's all man, Mister. Yuh'll hafta look far 'n wide b'fore yuh'll find 'nother one like 'im."

MIKE BURKE, crouching down behind a broad-trunked tree directly in front of the Lanning house, shoved some fresh cartridges into his Winchester, snapped up his rifle and fired. He stared at the darkened alley-way across the street and scowled. The fact that he had no way of telling the result of his shooting began to annoy him.

"Damned hellions," he muttered wrathfully. "If they'd on'y show th'mselves just once . . . so I could see what I was shootin' at I'd shore show 'em a thing or two."

A rifle cracked spitefully and a bullet whined and thudded its way into the sturdy tree with an annoying splat. Mike ducked instinctively. A second bullet whanged into the tree too, perhaps an inch or two higher up than the previous shot, and Mike scowled darkly. He forgot his own troubles when rifle fire broke out again down at the other end of the darkened street.

"H'm," he mused as the din increased. "They're shore cuttin' up a ruction down there awright. Still, with Marshall an' Gleason on hand t' tell them Red River fellers what t' do, Mister Benton an' his hired hands are gonna find th' goin' mighty tough. Wonder they don't git wise t' things? . . . they ain't gonna git nowheres with this sorta thing. On'y way t' do it'd be t' rush th' jail an' that'd cost 'em more men than they've got."

He disregarded a blast of bullets which whined overhead, turned and glanced at the house behind him. It was in total darkness. Then something slid over and crowded against him.

"What th'....."

"Shut up an' move over," a voice said curtly.

Burke scowled again. He glared at the speaker resentfully, recognized him and grunted.

"Who sent f'r you?" he demanded.

"Nob'dy," Jenkins snapped, almost in Burke's ear. "Figgered yuh wouldn't be able t' handle this by y'self so I come out t' take over."

Mike snorted.

"Oh, yuh did, eh? What makes you so good?"

"I'm bigger'n you are," the Ranger answered. "Reckon that's all th' answer yuh need. G'wan . . . move over."

Burke snorted again but finally moved over. Jenkins settled himself behind the tree. A heavy Colt gleamed in his right hand.

"Where are th' polecats?" he asked.

"In th' alley . . . 'cross th' street," Burke replied gruffly. "Bein' that yuh're such a big feller . . . you go 'head an' rush 'em. I'll wait for yuh here."

"That ain't even funny," the Ranger retorted. "Look . . . see that shadow over there? Just b'hind th' edge o' th' wall?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah . . . I see it. So what?"

"That shadow ain't no shadow . . . it's a man . . . see? Now we'll play a little game with 'im. It's somethin' I picked up fightin' Injuns. We'll both aim at 'im . . . you aim low an' I'll aim high. We're bound t' ketch 'im in b'tween. Git th' idea?"

"'Course . . . on'y I don't think much uv it," Burke answered.

"Expected yuh t' say that. Anyway, we're gonna try it. G'wan . . . git a bead on 'im. When I say 'three' . . . shoot."

Mike raised his rifle.

"Awright now . . . one . . . two . . . three!"

Both fired at the same time. The shadow arose, dissolved into a man who staggered out of the alley-way, tottered unsteadily on the sidewalk, dropped his rifle and suddenly plunged forward on his face and rolled into the gutter.

"There yuh are," Jenkins said with complete satisfaction. "Got 'im."

Burke lowered his rifle.

"Who got 'im?" he demanded.

"Dunno f'r shore . . . but I reckon it musta been me," the Ranger replied.

"Why, doggone yuh," Burke blurted out. "I c'n shoot rings around yuh. Huh! You got 'im. Like hell yuh did!"

A bullet sang past Jenkins' head and he flattened out hastily. Another whined past Burke who rolled away, sprawled out on his stomach and fired twice in reply. Each time he pressed the trigger he grunted.

"Oh, shore . . . he got 'im. Like hell he did!"

CHAPTER XVII

A SHADOWY figure whose black attire blended perfectly with the night light and made him part of it crept noiselessly around the rear of a darkened building which fronted on Lodeville's only street, halted and peered into an alley which ran streetward. Marshall's keen eyes made out the kneeling figures of four men just inside the alley itself. All of them were armed with rifles. Moonlight gleamed momentarily on the barrels of the rifles. Two of the men fired at the Lanning house across the street. A tinkle of glass indicated that a bullet had pierced or broken a window.

A rifle cracked somewhere in the darkness opposite the alley and a bullet wailed overhead and caromed off the side of the building and lost itself in flight. Rifle fire too arose at the other end of the street, swelled briefly, slackened presently and finally died out.

Marshall whipped out his Colts. He stepped into the alley.

"Drop yo' guns!" he snapped.

The two men nearest him dropped their rifles and arose. A third man wheeled and leveled his rifle but a Colt flamed and the man sagged against the wall, dropped his Winchester and crumpled up. The fourth man bolted toward the street. Marshall's gun belched protestingly and the man stumbled and fell, fought his way up to his feet again, turned slowly and fired. Marshall answered, two shots that followed in the span of seconds. The man swayed and toppled over and sprawled headlong in the shadow-draped alley. Marshall stepped forward.

"Awright now," he said curtly. "Git 'em up an' keep 'em there."

Two pairs of arms climbed skyward.

"Turn aroun' an' face th' street," Marshall ordered.

The men obeyed. Marshall stepped up behind them, jerked their guns out of their holsters, spied their rifles and kicked them out of the way.

"Awright . . . march."

The men plodded up the alley. They glanced fleetingly at the huddled figure at the base of the wall, then as they came abreast of him, at the second figure sprawled in the entrance to the alley, circled him and jerked themselves back when a rifle shot whined over their heads. Marshall, following at their heels, crowded into them, shoved them aside.

"Mike!" he yelled. "Don't shoot!"

Two shadowy figures, one short and stocky, the other tall and lean, arose in front of the Lanning house.

"It's me . . . Marshall!" he called. "C'mon over here!"

The two figures advanced slowly, halted finally at the curb. Burke he recognized at once. Although there was something familiar about the tall man Marshall was unable to recognize him for a moment. He studied the man, then he grinned. It was Smith Jenkins.

"Yeah?" Burke asked.

It was evident that he was still a bit doubtful that it was Marshall.

"Go 'head, you fellers," Marshall ordered.

His captives trudged across the street. As they came closer Jenkins laughed.

"It's him awright," he said.

Burke grunted.

"Who'd yuh think it was?" Marshall retorted. "Benton?"

Burke stepped in front of the two men. They halted mutely. Marshall eyed the Ranger sharply.

"What are you doin' out here?" he demanded.

"Oh . . . I just come out f'r s'me air," Jenkins answered casually.

"Reckon yuh've had yo' fill by now," Marshall said dryly, "so s'ppose yuh turn aroun' an' trot right back t' bed?"

"Nope," Jenkins said. "I'm up an' I aim t' stay up."

Marshall shrugged his shoulder.

"Awright . . . if that's th' way yuh feel about it. The girl . . ."

A scream from the darkened house stilled his tongue. Instantly he rushed toward the house.

"Watch them fellers!" he cried over his shoulder.

He plunged toward the front door, hesitated momentarily when he reached it, whirled away from it and raced around the house toward the rear. Midway a shadowy figure stepped in front of him.

"Hol' on there!"

Flame spurted from Marshall's hip. The shadowy figure gasped and melted away. Marshall raced on, swung around the back of the house and saw another dark figure dragging a struggling, sobbing Molly Lanning away.

"Marshall!" he heard her scream. "Marshall!"

The shadow of the black clad man fell across the intervening space. Molly's captor looked up, released her and backed away from her, reached for his gun when a heavy Colt thundered twice. The man sagged and crumpled up. Marshall caught Molly in his arms. She clung to him and sobbed hysterically on his chest.

"Yuh're awright now," he said gently. "Yuh're safe now, Molly."

Presently her sobbing abated. She straightened up. Her arms slid upward, over his chest and around his neck. Mike Burke came skidding around the house. He came to an abrupt halt and stared, wide-eyed, at what he saw. He gulped and backed away as noiselessly as he could, turned slowly only to halt and take another lingering look. A grin spread over his face.

"Reckon this is one o' them times when two's comp'ny an' three's a crowd," he mused.

He chuckled softly, turned again and trudged away.

CHAPTER XVIII

MONTE GLEASON plodded wearily into the office, grinned at Marshall and Jenkins, made his way past them to a chair and dropped into it. He stretched his long legs, shoved his hat back from his eyes and finally looked up.

"Wa-al," he announced. "Yuh c'n b'gin soon's yuh want ter."

"Got everythin' set?" Marshall asked.

The deputy nodded.

"Everythin'. Every s'loon in town is shut tighter'n a drum an' they're gonna stay that way 'till after th' trial. Like yuh wanted . . . every man's got a ticket with a number on it . . . f'r th' drawin' o' th' jury, y'know . . . an' just t' be on th' safe side 'case any o' them d'cide t' play tricks with us, I got me a reg'lar record o' their names an' their numbers."

"Nice work, Monte," Marshall commented.

Gleason grinned again.

"Shucks, t'wasn't anythin'," he said. "Yuh know that place down th' street . . . th' empty buildin' with th' big store? Got th' owners' p'rmission t' hold court there. We oughta be able t' sit more'n a hun'erd . . . mebbe more. So . . . soon's yuh're ready we c'n go to it."

"Did yuh tell 'em all when t' be there?" Marshall asked.

"Uh-huh . . . in 'n hour fr'm now."

Marshall nodded.

"Good. That'll give us time t' sorta git things org'nized. S'ppose we git young Benton an' take him over there?"

TWO of the Red River men were ordered to mount their horses and take up positions at the ends of the long street. They were instructed to fire a warning blast of two rifle shots if either of them sighted an oncoming party of horsemen. After the mounted guards cantered away, Curt Benton was brought out, then, flanked by Marshall and Gleason he was led, protestingly of course, up the street. Burke and Jenkins went on ahead while the other deputies, their rifles raised and ready, followed behind the prisoner.

The street was alive with men, alone, in small groups and in large groups. All of them looked up sharply and eyed the brisk striding party but no one made any attempt to interfere. The prisoner was led into the courtroom and pushed into a chair in a far corner of the room. Gleason cautioned him against any false moves and tapped his holster significantly. Some of the special deputies sauntered inside too and took up their posts inside the doorway while some of the others halted outside.

Gleason had arranged for the loan of chairs from both Finneran's 'Pot o' Gold' and from Ed Brown's 'Golden Nugget'. The chairs had already been arranged in long rows and six chairs were set up in a corner for the jury. Marshall looked over

at Gleason. The latter nodded. Marshall stepped to the door.

"Awright," he announced in a loud voice. "Court's open."

He wheeled and moved aside when Tim Kelly shoved a huge packing case into the doorway. Two men sauntered in, halted and looked first at the open case, then at Marshall. The latter grinned.

"Unbuckle yo' gun belts, Gents," he said casually, "an' drop 'em in there. Yuh c'n pick 'em up again when yuh leave."

One of the men frowned and looked over at his companion who simply shrugged his shoulder, unbuckled his belt and dropped it into the packing case and tramped off toward the first row of chairs. The first man mumbled something under his breath but when Marshall's eyes glinted, he quickly unbuckled his belt and tossed it into the box, stepped around Marshall and strode away. Other men came in too, then presently the place began to crowd up. One burly man limped in, looked down into the packing case, dropped his belt on top of the others and strolled off when Marshall's arm shot out, gripped him by the arm and swung him around. The man's heavy face reddened.

"What's th' idea?" he demanded and tried to pull away.

Marshall smiled patiently but maintained his vise-like grip.

"There're two holsters on yo' belt, Mister," he said quietly, "but on'y one gun. Where's th' other one?"

The man scowled darkly.

"Lost it," he snapped.

Marshall shook his head.

"Don't believe it," he said evenly, then his voice grew suddenly cold. "Hand it over."

The man jerked away. Marshall's fist swished upward and landed solidly on the man's jaw. He crashed over backwards. Marshall bent over him, yanked off his right boot and plunged his hand into it, withdrew his hand and tossed the boot aside. He yanked off the left boot, pulled a Colt out of it and smiled coldly. The man struggled into a sitting position. Marshall tossed the boot into his arms. He handed the gun to Kelly who grinned and shoved it into his belt. Marshall turned away. The man pulled on his boots, scrambled to his feet, backed away and collided with a chair and dropped into it.

Jenkins sauntered in, halted and looked around the room, spied a vacant chair in the last row and strode over to it and sat down. Marshall turned to Kelly.

"Watch th' door," he said briefly. "I'm gonna git things goin'."

Kelly nodded. Marshall wheeled and strode to the front of the room. A large cardboard box had been placed beneath one of the 'jury' chairs. Marshall lifted the box, dragged one of the chairs to the center and placed the box on the chair.

He turned slightly and glanced at the prisoner. Curt looked up, glared at him for a moment, then he lowered his eyes. Marshall faced the court.

"Awright, men," he began. A hum of indistinct voices arose and faded out. He waited a moment longer, then he went on. "T' b'gin with, we aim t' c'nduct this here trial accordin' t' law. We aim t' give young Benton . . . th 'pris'ner . . . a better break'n he gave th' feller he killed. So's I can't be accused o' tryin' t' influence yuh one way or 'nother, I don't intend t' say anythin' against th' prisoner or anythin' for th' other feller . . . Lee Simms. I don't know much 'bout either o' them an' I don't put much stock in what others try t' tell me 'bout them. Th' on'y thing I'm interested in is that Curt Benton was r'sponsible f'r Simms' death . . . an' that's why he's here now."

THERE was a cough from someone in the third row, then a brief shuffling of booted feet and a scraping of a chair on the floor.

"Th' law says," Marshall went on, "that we gotta have a Judge or a jury. If Judge Avery'd been here he'd run this an' tried th' pris'ner, but since he ain't, we'll hafta c'ntent ourselves with th' next best thing . . . a jury. We need six men f'r th' jury. We don't aim t' ask f'r volunteers . . . no, sir, . . . we aim t' draw 'em by number. In this box," he nodded toward it, "are slips o' paper with numbers on 'em correspondin' t' th' numbers on th' tickets Gleason gave out. Th' first six numbers picked'll be th' fellers t' sit on th' jury. Reckon that's fair."

He paused and ran his eye over the men in the first row, and nodded to the man in the fifth seat.

"Stand up, Mister," he said briefly.

The man climbed to his feet. He was tall and lean and a bit embarrassed and

shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

"What's yo' name?"

"Jake Caldwell."

"Come over here," Marshall instructed. " 'Longside o' this box."

Caldwell sauntered over. Marshall turned the chair around so that the box would be in plain view of everyone. He removed the cover from the box and tossed it aside.

"Stick yo' hand inter th' box," he went on, "an' pull out a slip o' paper. Don't look at it till I tell yuh to . . . then . . . when I give yuh th' word . . . read th' number. C'n yuh read?"

Caldwell flushed. A loud laugh swept the rows of spectators. Marshall grinned.

"Go 'head," he said presently.

Caldwell grinned sheepishly, bent over the box and drew out a folded slip of paper. He held it aloft and looked at Marshall.

"Open it an' read th' number on it."

Caldwell unfolded the slip of paper. He looked at it then at Marshall. The latter nodded.

"Seventy-two," Caldwell droned.

There was a moment's silence, then a man in the last row coughed lightly.

"That yo' number, Mister?" Marshall asked.

The man frowned, raised his head slowly and nodded mutely.

"Awright. Bring yo' ticket up here an' hand it t' Caldwell so's he c'n c'mpare it with th' slip he's holdin' an' see that th' numbers are th' same. C'mon."

The man climbed to his feet and made his way forward, handed his ticket to Caldwell who took it, glanced at it and nodded to Marshall. The latter took both the ticket and the slip of paper, compared them and put them in his pocket.

"What's yo' name?" Marshall asked.

"Jim Parker."

"Awright, Parker . . . take th' first seat over there," Marshall said, nodding toward the 'jury box.'

Parker frowned again and hesitated. A wave of whispering ran through the spectators.

"Yuh're holdin' things up," Marshall said quietly.

Parker turned slowly, glanced at Curt Benton who raised his head and looked sharply at him. Parker hitched up his pants' belt, squared his shoulders and trudged forward and took the first seat among those set aside for the jurors. Caldwell looked over at Marshall, waiting for the black clad man's nod.

"Go 'head."

Caldwell drew out a second slip of paper, unfolded it and glanced at the number on it, then he looked up.

"Seven," he called.

A tall man in the second row got to his feet. It was Mike Finneran.

"Reckon that means me," he said simply.

He came forward and handed his ticket to Caldwell who nodded to him and handed the slip and the ticket to Marshall. The latter compared them and put them in his pocket. Finneran needed no urging. He strode forward and seated himself beside Parker. The two jurors looked sharply at each other, then they settled themselves in their chairs.

CALDWELL drew out a third slip of paper. He looked at it, turned it over, looked up finally at Marshall and grinned.

"Ain't nuthin' on this one," he said.

A bald-headed man in the last seat in the last row laughed loudly.

"That one must be mine," he said and laughed again. "Awright if I go home now, Sheriff?"

Others laughed with him. Caldwell drew out another slip and unfolded it.

"Thirteen," he called.

The bald-headed man grinned sheepishly.

"Here . . . doggone it."

He climbed to his feet.

"Shoulda expected that danged number couldn't bring me nuthin' but bad luck," he remarked.

He strode forward and presently took his place next to Finneran.

The next three numbers were drawn without delay or interruption and the jury was completed. Jake Caldwell sat down again with a deep sigh of relief.

"Reckon that's all," Marshall said presently. "Now we'll call th' on'y man who was a witness t' Lee Simms' killin'. Kelly . . . Dave Barry out there?"

"Right outside, Sheriff. Want 'im?"

"Yep. Send 'im in."

Dave Barry, lean and grizzled, swaggered in, halted a moment and looked about him, whipped off his hat, grinned an embarrassed, toothless grin and sauntered forward.

"Over here, Barry," Marshall said and beckoned to him. Dave halted beside him presently.

"Raise yo' right hand."

Dave shifted his hat to his left hand, looked at his right hand, noted that it was dirty and wiped it on his shirt front, grinned and raised it aloft.

"Do yuh swear t' tell th' truth, th' hull truth an' nuthin' but th' truth, so help yuh God?"

"'Course."

"What's yo' name?"

"Yuh kiddin'?"

"What's yo' name?" Marshall repeated.

"Dave Barry . . . same's it allus was. Thought everybody knew it by now. I've on'y been livin' 'round here a month shy o' five years."

Marshall grinned.

"Just answer th' questions."

"I aim ter."

"What d'yuh do?"

"Now? Nuthin' 'cept hang around an' mooch drinks."

A wave of laughter swept the room. Dave turned and winked at the men in front of him.

"You uster drive th' stage b'tween Lodeville an' Red River . . . right?"

"Right."

"R'member yo' last trip t' Red River?" Marshall asked.

"I shore do."

"When was it?"

"Th' day Lee Simms was killed," Barry answered promptly.

"S'ppose yuh tell us in yo' own way just what happened on that trip?"

"Be glad ter."

Dave began a recital of the trip. The spectators listened attentively. He droned on steadily for several minutes.

"Mind yuh, I ain't sayin' that th' feller we saw first off was Curt Benton just b'cause he was ridin' a horse with white forelegs same's th' one Curt rides. I thought it was him b'cause I know there ain't another horse like that un 'round these parts. Now I ain't sayin' that th' feller who fired at us an' missed was Curt just b'cause I happen t' know . . . same's most o' you fellers know . . . that Curt couldn't hit th' broad side uv a barn 'less he was right on top uv it. An' I ain't sayin' that that feller was Curt just b'cause he fired with his left hand even though you an' I know that Curt's left handed too. I am sayin' though that all 'n all it shore looked a heap like Curt but whether it was him or not, I ain't able t' say f'r shore."

Dave turned slowly.

"Sheriff . . . that's about th' same story as I told yuh once b'fore . . . right?"

Marshall nodded.

"Reckon it is. Awright, Barry . . . that's all."

"C'n I sit down now an' see th' rest o' th' show?" the grizzled driver asked.

"Shore . . . go find y'self a seat that ain't got nobody in it."

Dave grinned, turned and trudged away.

"Got one more feller t' hear fr'm," Marshall announced. "Ranger Smith Jenkins."

There was a general craning of necks as Smith Jenkins, grave and pale-faced, got to his feet and slowly made his way forward. He halted shortly beside Marshall.

"Raise yo' right hand."

Jenkins obeyed.

"Do yuh swear t' tell th' truth, th' hull truth an' nuthin' but th' truth, s' help yuh God?"

"I do."

"What's yo' name?"

"Smith Jenkins."

"What's yo' job?"

"I'm a Ranger . . . c'missioned by th' Gov'nor o' this State."

"Tell th' Court what happened th' day Lee Simms was killed."

Jenkins turned slowly and faced the jury.

"I'd been d'tailed by Captain Daniels t' head f'r Lodeville an' see what was goin' on there."

"S'ppose yuh skip that part an' b'gin by tellin' what happened in th' Pass?" Marshall suggested.

Jenkins nodded.

"I was 'bout half a mile fr'm th' Pass when I heard gunfire. I spurred m' horse an' when I come closer I saw th' stage whirlin' down th' road. . . . away fr'm th' Pass an' headed f'r Red River. I heard more shootin' an' then some yellin' an' pretty soon three men come along. They were ridin' f'r all they were worth an' shootin' at th' stage. I figgered it was a hold-up an' went t' work. Reckon I come along so sudden-like an' outta nowheres that I musta plumb s'prised them three critters. Anyway, I got two o' them an' th' third wheeled an' hightailed it. It was new country t' me an' I lost 'im after a while."

Jenkins paused and moistened his lips.

"I went back t' th' Pass," he continued shortly, " 'cause I r'membered seein' a feller layin' there in th' middle o' th' road. I found him still there. He was dead.... shot through th' head an' face."

"Could yuh tell me who he was?" Marshall asked.

Jenkins nodded.

"Figgered he was th' Sheriff 'cause his badge was pinned to his shirt," he answered.

"Go on."

"There was another feller layin' a ways ahead . . . up inside th' Pass itself. He was dead too. Fr'm th' looks uv it, his horse musta fallen on 'im an' crushed him t' death. His hat was layin' close by. There was a label inside th' sweat-band an' th' name o' Rusty was written on th' label."

A murmur ran through the room.

"Anythin' else?" Marshall asked.

"I follered th' tracks o' th' feller that got away....that is, I follered his horse's tracks....clear inter town. It was night when I got there an' th' horse, all sweated up an' dog tired, was tied in front o' th' Golden Nugget. Reckon yuh know what happened after that."

"Would yuh be willin' t' swear that that feller was Curt Benton?" Marshall asked.

"I would," Jenkins answered simply.

"That's all," Marshall said briefly.

Jenkins turned slowly and went back to his seat. Marshall turned to the jury.

"Wa-al, that's th' hull story. Yuh've heard th' evidence. It's yo' job now t' d'cide whether th' pris'ner's guilty or not. Th' way I see it, even if he didn't do th' actu'l killin' uv Lee Simms, he was just as guilty as th' feller who did 'cause he was right there an' bein' a member uv th' gang tryin' t' pull off th' hold-up makes him r'sponsible f'r th' killin' just as it does th' others. Now....any uv yuh wanna ask 'ny questions? If yuh do....now's th' time.'

He looked questioningly from one to the other but each man shook his head mutely in turn.

"Awright," Marshall said presently. "See that closed door yonder? Just b'fore yuh come t' th' back door? Wa-al, there's a small room in there. It's empty. Yuh c'n do all yo' arguin' an' talkin' or whatever else is necessary in there. So go ahead.... th' door's open....an' lemme know soon's yuh hit on somethin'."

The six men climbed to their feet. They plodded away, past Curt Benton who looked up eagerly and eyed them hopefully, scanning each man's face for some sign of encouragement. Perhaps one or two of them looked at him; most of them looked past him. After they had filed by, he frowned and sank back in his chair.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MINUTES went by slowly. Men whispered to one another or exchanged significant glances. Some of them sank back in their chairs and closed their eyes while others yawned and stretched their arms and legs and frowned with impatience.

"What's takin' 'em so long?" a man demanded aloud. "Hell....he's either guilty or innocent. Seems t' me figgerin' out which he is oughtn't take s' long's it's takin' them fellers."

Another man, an older man, in the row in front of him, turned slowly.

"If it was yo' life, Mister, that was hangin' on what them fellers d'cide," he said coldly, "I reckon yuh'd want 'em t' think everythin' over a-plenty b'fore they made up their minds. So just keep yo' shirt on. They'll be comin' out soon enough."

The impatient man glowered resentfully and sank back in his chair.

Then, with dramatic suddenness, the door opened...a bit only at first, then it opened wide. A sudden hush swept over the courtroom. Boredom and impatience vanished. The spectators leaned forward in their seats. Armed men—the special deputies from Red River—crowded into the front doorway to hear the verdict. Curt Benton sat upright in his chair, tensed with nervousness and expectation.

Mike Finneran, strangely pale and tight-lipped, was the first to emerge. He jerked his head up and looked straight ahead and trudged slowly to his seat. Parker and the others came out presently too, all of them grave-faced, and took their seats. Curt Benton half arose in his chair, disregarding for the moment Monte Gleason's restraining hand.

"Wa-al?" Marshall asked.

A man coughed and a dozen men around him turned sharply and looked wrathfully at him. He flushed and lowered his eyes.

"Reach a d'cision?" Marshall asked.

Parker looked away. Two or three of the other jurors nodded mutely.

"Wa-al?" Marshall demanded. "Talk up someb'dy."

Parker scowled.

"Ask him," he said gruffly, nodding toward Mike Finneran.

"Awright, Finneran....what about it?" Marshall asked.

The saloon keeper climbed to his feet.

"We've reached a d'cision awright," he said slowly, "on'y we ain't a hun'erd per cent agreed on it. That make 'ny diff'rence?"

"Nope....none that I c'n' think uv. Long's it's a m'jority I reckon that's good enough. How'd yuh come out?"

"We're three an' two....three uv us say he's guilty an' two say he ain't."

Marshall eyed him sharply.

"Three an' two make five. There're six uv yuh. What's th' matter with th' last feller?"

Finneran smiled.

"That's Parker....but it seems like he can't make us his mind one way or 'nother," he replied.

Marshall frowned.

"So that's how it is, eh?"

He shot Parker a scornful, withering glance.

"Reckon we'll just hafta f'rgit 'bout him," he said. "Mebbe he ain't full grown enough yet t' know his own mind or mebbe he ain't man enough t' speak it. Wa-al, whichever it is, it ain't important now. Th' verdict stands at three t' two an' that's good enough."

"Th' hell it is!" Curt cried.

For a moment the courtroom was still... stunned by his sudden outcry. Gleason had evidently forgotten about his prisoner in his excitement and now as everyone stared, wide-eyed, they saw a gun gleam in Curt's right hand. It was Gleason's gun and Benton jammed the muzzle of the weapon against the dazed deputy's spine. He gripped Gleason's gunbelt and held him fast, in front of him, while he maneuvered him toward the back door.

Marshall's hands streaked toward his holsters but he checked himself instantly. Young Benton was too completely shielded by Gleason.

In the front doorway some of the Red River men jerked up their rifles. Curt disregarded them for a moment, knowing full well that they would not chance shooting for fear of hitting Gleason. He stole a glance at the jury and laughed coldly.

"So four uv yuh got it all fixed f'r me t' hang, eh?" he cried tauntingly. "Figgered yuh could cold deck me right t' hell, eh? Wa-al, it ain't gonna be that easy t' git rid o' me. Hell, no. B'fore I go I'm gonna 'range f'r some comp'ny so's I won't git lonesome."

He laughed again.

"Kinda spoilin' yo' fun, ain't I, Sheriff?" he said chidingly, then his voice suddenly grew hard. "If any uv yuh move I'll kill this feller in front o' me like I would a dog. You fellers near th' door....put down them guns....yuh hear?"

Slowly the armed men in the doorway lowered their rifles. Curt laughed.

"That's better," he cried.

Then a cold, evil grin played over his mouth.

"Finneran!" he cried. "Yuh're first!"

The saloon keeper's eyes gleamed. The muscles in his jaws twitched.

"Git up!" Curt snarled.

"Don't be a fool, Benton," Marshall snapped. "Killin' him or me or anybody else ain't gonna help yuh none. There are a dozen armed men here....an' yuh're on'y one. Th' minute yuh pulls that trigger, yuh'll be blasted t' hell. Now put down that gun. Put it down, I tell yuh!"

"Finneran!" Curt screamed.

Slowly and heavily Mike Finneran climbed to his feet. Curt whirled Gleason sideways. The gun in his hand roared. Finneran gulped, sagged momentarily, then he braced himself and forced himself erect again. A shadow of a smile toyed at the corners of his mouth Defiantly he raised his head and waited unflinchingly for the next shot. He stiffened jerkily as blood stained his shirt front, gasped and pitched forward on his face. Curt laughed again.

"Larsen!" he cried.

The man sitting directly behind Parker recoiled....went deathly white....when he heard his name called.

"No....no...." he stammered. "Yuh ....yuh mustn't!"

Marshall took a step forward but Curt whirled behind Gleason again. Marshall scowled and came to a halt. Curt peered out from behind Gleason, then his hysterical laugh echoed through the court room. Another gun boomed from somewhere off to a side of the room. Curt's laugh died in his throat.

He gasped aloud, forcibly, as though someone had struck him and driven the

breath out of his body, and now he was struggling to regain it. The gun thundered again and Curt shuddered, bowed his head and swayed a bit on unsteady legs. He dropped Gleason's gun, turned slowly, away from the dazed deputy, his arms outstretched as though he were groping for something in the darkness, fell against the wall and sobbed, then he slowly crumpled up.

Now the spell was broken. Stunned men awoke with a frenzied cry.

Larsen collapsed in his chair. The other jurors, Parker included, leaped to their feet, crowded around Finneran and turned him over on his back. Experienced hands tore open his shirt. Other men bounded forward and bent over Curt Benton. They straightened up and backed away a bit when a pool of blood deepened beneath his huddled body.

A heavily built, gray-haired man in an end seat in the second row lowered a smoking Colt. The men around him made no attempt to seize him. Instead they stared at him, unbelievingly perhaps. He trudged forward, halted in front of Marshall, shifted the gun and handed it, butt first, to the black-clad man.

"Reckon that's that," he said very simply. "I've been waitin' more'n three years t' git square with that murderin' coyote an' now it's done. I'm glad....I'm satisfied now, although f'r a few minutes there I was afraid he was gonna git away. Wa-al, I'm ready t' go 'long with yuh, Sheriff."

Gleason came up to them, his gun in his hand. He seemed suddenly old and bent.

"Benton's dead," he said dully. "Reckon Finneran is too."

"'Fraid so," Marshall answered. He shook his head. "He shore was a game one, awright."

"Wish it was me 'stead o' him a-layin' there," Gleason blurted out. "Why'n hell didn't Benton plug me right off? It was comin' t' me f'r lettin' 'im grab m' gun."

Marshall swung him around.

"Don't lemme hear 'ny more o' that fool talk," he said sharply. "If it was anybody's fault....it was mine f'r not watchin' 'im closer. Take this man 'long with yuh t' th' office. I'll be 'long directly."

IT WAS half an hour later when Marshall appeared at the office. He halted briefly in the open doorway. Gleason, an expression of complete dejection on his face, was pacing the floor. The gray-haired man was sitting quietly near the desk, looking on patiently and calmly. Marshall closed the door and leaned back against it. He shoved his hat back from his eyes.

"Wa-al," he began presently, "I fin'lly got things back t' rights again. Got Devery, th' undertaker feller, t' borrer himself a buckboard an' a couple uv us loaded young Curt on it so's Devery could take 'im home." He paused for a moment. "Oh, yeah, Monte....if yuh c'n stan' still a minute...."

Gleason halted.

"I tol' Finneran yuh'd stop over t' see 'im later on," Marshall said quietly.

Gleason stared at him incredulously. He gulped presently and tried to speak but couldn't somehow. The black-clad man grinned.

"Yep....Doc says he'll be as good as he ever was inside uv a couple o' weeks. Doggoned ol' coot....yuh know what he did? He dropped his gun belt inter th' packin' case same's th' others did, on'y under his coat he was wearin' a shoulder holster. How d'yuh like that? Dunno but mebbe I oughta chuck him inter jail just f'r tryin' t' put one over on us. Anyway, th' bullet glanced offa th' buckle uv his strap an' instead o' goin' through him, it just ploughed inter his shoulder an' busted it."

Gleason blinked, turned away slowly, stumbled into a chair and fell into it.

"Where....where is he?" he managed to ask.

"Over at Molly's," Marshall answered. "With Jenkins up an' aroun' again reckon she felt like she needed somethin' t' keep 'er busy an' insisted that we tote Finneran over there."

Gleason shook his head.

"I'll be damned," he muttered.

Marshall laughed lightly, then he turned to the gray-haired man. The latter looked up at him.

"An' now, Mister....what d'yuh s'pose I oughta do with you?" Marshall asked gravely.

The man shrugged his shoulder.

"Dunno, Sheriff...but whatever it is... go 'head an' do it. I'm ready."

Marshall perched himself on the edge of the desk.

"I've been askin' some questions 'bout yuh," Marshall said presently. "I under-

stan' that Curt Benton killed yo' son. That right?"

"Uh-huh. Curt got drunk one night an' started t' shoot up th' town. He put a couple o' bullets through one uv our big winders....I own th' gen'ral store down th' street, y'know....an' Billy....my son ....went out an' tried t' git 'im t' quit. Curt shot 'im down in cold blood."

Marshall nodded.

"That's just about what I was told, too," he said. He got to his feet again. "Got a couple o' things that need 'tendin' to, Roberts....so run along, willya?"

The gray-haired man blinked.

"Yuh mean....yuh ain't gonna 'rest me?" he asked.

"Arrest yuh....f'r what? F'r killin' a feller who was just about t' kill a heap o' others? 'Course I ain't gonna arrest yuh."

Roberts' eyes filled. Marshall patted the man's broad back.

"C'mon, man, c'mon. Buck up now. I think I c'n understan' what yuh've been goin' through since yo' boy went. 'Course this won't bring 'im back t' yuh....still it'll make things a heap easier for yuh knowin' that yuh've kinda squared things up f'r 'im."

Roberts got to his feet.

"I'm obliged to yuh, Sheriff."

"Far's I c'n see," Marshall answered, "it's a heap th' other way around. Wa-al, go along now....an' Roberts...."

The man turned.

"Yeah?"

"Better keep yo' eye peeled....savvy? We ain't seen or heard th' last uv Greg Benton."

Roberts nodded understandingly and trudged out. Marshall looked over at Gleason.

"Wa-al....feel better now?" he asked.

The deputy grinned a bit.

"An' how. Y'know....killin' a feller when it's either you or him....is one thing. But seein' another feller shot down when it's yo' fault....man, b'lieve me....that's somethin' else again. Th' next time I guard a pris'ner....yuh c'n take m' word f'r it, Marshall....I'll guard 'im, awright....like no pris'ner's ever been guarded b'fore." He climbed to his feet. "Wa-al....what happens now?"

Marshall's face grew hard.

"What d'yuh s'pose'll happen....soon's Greg Benton sees his son?" he countered.

"There'll be hell t' pay," Gleason answered promptly.

"That's th' answer t' yo' question."

"Then we oughta do somethin'."

"We will....soon's th' boys git back. Tol' 'em t' straighten up th' place an' git them chairs yuh borrered back t' their owners."

"Uh-huh....an' meanwhile?"

"Yuh might git out th' rifles we still got inside an' load 'em. Mebbe yuh better lay out plenty o' cartridges, too....where they'll be handy t' git at when things start happenin' 'round here. I got 'n idea that all hell's gonna bust loose when it gits dark. Just wait an' see if I ain't right."

CHAPTER XX

DARKNESS and night came slowly to Lodeville, particularly slowly to the impatient Marshall. However, he was not alone in his belief that nightfall would bring Benton to avenge his son's death. The town's citizenry too seemed to feel that Greg would be heard from and took pains to see that Benton would have no opportunity to vent his wrath upon them. They proposed to leave the defense of Lodeville to the law and the lawmen.

Of course the saloon keepers ridiculed the idea and sought to get them to stay a while longer but to a man they declined and drifted away at an unusually early hour and made themselves scarce.

Of course, too, many of them fortified themselves by purchasing bottles of whiskey to be consumed in the safety and privacy of their individual rooms. Then, when night came on and settled its veil of darkness over the town, the street was strangely deserted and silent. Presently, too, the lights in the stores and saloons were dimmed; shortly after they were turned out.

In the office Jenkins examined his Colt. When he was satisfied that it was ready for instant use he holstered it and looked up at Marshall.

"Wa-al," he announced, "I'm ready. Let 'em come....if they've a mind ter. What do I do.... stay here or what?"

"Yuh're stayin' here with Gleason an' me," Marshall replied. "We'll work outta here. We c'n hop over t' any part o' th' street that needs help."

"Uh-huh. Where yuh got yo' men?"

"They're spread out," Marshall explained,

"so's they c'n do th' most good. I've sent another man over t' Molly Lanning's place, too. He'll guard th' back o' th' house while Burke keeps 'n eye on th' front."

"An' th' others?"

"Got men posted on th' roofs uv buildin's near both ends o' th' street . . . couple across th' street an' even got one feller on our roof, too. If I'm right an' Benton does show up, we oughta be able t' make things mighty int'restin' f'r 'im."

Gleason turned away from the window.

"It's deader'n all hell outside," he said presently. "Shore looks like everyone in town figgered th' same's you did, Marshall....that Papa Benton'll come a-callin' t'night. There ain't a light or a human t' be seen....nuthin' but some shadows here and there that I know are our men. Otherwise, yuh'd think this was one o' them ghost towns."

Jenkins looked up again.

"I've just been thinkin'....if Benton does come....I got 'n idea he won't be comin' after us. He ain't found a way t' deal with us yet....leastways I don't figger he has. He'll come after th' fellers on th' jury....th' ones that voted Curt guilty."

"That makes sense t' me," Monte Gleason said. He sauntered forward. "Them an' that Roberts feller who plugged Curt'll be th' ones he'll be after. Benton's a'ready tangled with us a couple o' times an' come off second best every time. Now yuh know 's well's I do that he ain't that much uv a fool t' keep up f'rever when he c'n fix them other fellers' wagons without gittin' hurt at it. Ain't that right?"

Jenkins nodded in agreement.

"Shore is."

Marshall perched himself on the edge of the desk and grinned at them.

"Long's you fellers agree, reckon th' idea must be worthwhile," he drawled. " 'Course that'll be Benton's purpose in comin' here. I figgered that out long ago so I went over t' see Roberts an' invited 'im t' spend th' night here. He r'fused....said he'd stay over t' his own place an' take his chances."

Jenkins frowned.

"What about th' others....th' three b'side Finneran?" he demanded.

"Uh-huh....what about them?" Gleason demanded. "Did they r'fuse yuh too?"

Marshall shook his head.

"Nope....I couldn't find hide nor hair o' them," he answered, "so I couldn't ask 'em. They've prob'bly hid th'mselves away."

"Or hightailed it," Gleason added dryly.

"Mebbe," Marshall grunted.

The conversation ceased. The Ranger picked up a rifle and broke it open, saw that it was fully loaded, snapped it shut and put it down, reached for another and broke it open. Gleason turned slowly and trudged back to the window. Marshall got to his feet, hitched up his belt. Then somewhere in that vast darkness and silence outside a lonely coyote wailed for an instant. Jenkins and Marshall looked at each other.

"Hear that?" the black-clad man asked.

The Ranger nodded.

"Sounded like a coyote," he replied, "on'y...."

"On'y what?" Gleason asked over his shoulder.

"On'y it wasn't 'n ord'nary coyote yuh just heard yelp," Marshall said quietly. "That one was a diff'rent kind....a two-legged one that answers t' th' name o' Benton."

"Uh-huh," Jenkins added, "an' that yelp musta been some sorta signal."

Marshall grunted.

"Right....an' what it meant we'll know soon enough. Douse that light, Jenkins. Our comp'ny's come so let's git over t' th' winder an' be on hand t' give 'em th' welcome they d'serve."

Jenkins 'doused' the lamp light. Gleason had already whipped out his gun. He poised it on the window sill, ready for instant use. Marshall and Jenkins came bounding across the room and knelt down beside him.

"Good thing we didn't bother t' have th' glass put back in th' winder," Marshall said lightly.

A RIFLE cracked suddenly....somewhere down along the end of the street, then in a twinkling others opened fire and added their leaden thunder to the din. Sixguns chimed in too and the flashes of their guns stabbed the night light. Then a rush of pounding hoofs filled the night air and a swarm of shadowy horsemen burst into the street, firing from the saddle as they came on. Riflemen across the street opened fire on them. Directly opposite the office a dark figure stumbled out of a shadowy doorway, tottered toward the curb and sprawled headlong into the gutter. Marshall cursed.

"That was one uv our men," he said bitterly.

Then the approaching horde of horsemen thundered into view . . . dark, solidly-formed, indistinguishable ranks upon ranks of riders whose flaming guns blasted the buildings, the windows and doorways on both sides of the street with a devastating fire. It was evident now that Benton had learned something from their previous encounters . . . evident too that he proposed to sweep away every defender and his place of concealment.

"Lookit 'em!" Gleason gasped. "There must been more'n a hun'erd uv 'em. Where'n hell did they all come fr'm?"

"Benton musta r'cruited 'em fr'm th' hills," Jenkins answered. "Reckon every badman in this part o' th' country's ridin' against us t'night."

"Never mind th' gab," Marshall said curtly. "Git ready."

Then Benton's men were upon them. Guns belched fire and flame from the window and horses cried out in pain and terror and sought to break away but their riders lashed them and whirled them back into line. Here a horse plunged forward on his knees and tossed his rider over his head; there a horse toppled over and pinned his rider beneath him.

A man rolled over in the gutter, struggled to get out of the path of the plunging horses when a blast of gunfire from one of Marshall's Colts hurled him to the ground again. Thundering hoofs flashed over him and trampled him under foot. Marshall backed away from the window, crammed fresh cartridges into his guns, made his way forward again and crouched down.

"Better reload," he said over his shoulder and snapped a shot into the street.

Jenkins and Gleason crawled away, reloaded and returned. The three of them blazed away at the whirling mass in front of them, emptying saddles and cluttering up the street with moaning, broken bodies and wounded, panic-stricken, threshing horses. Farther down the street a handful of riders wheeled their mounts, rode up upon the sidewalk and poured a deadly fire into a darkened doorway where one of the Red River men had been posted. After a minute, when they had silenced him, they turned away and went on again, spraying lead as they advanced.

Now a group of horsemen pulled up in front of the office, flung themselves off their horses and plunged toward the door and hurled themselves at it, but the sturdy door withstood them. They turned away and headed toward the window, perhaps to effect an entry, but a withering fire mowed them down.

Another band of horsemen whirled up and drum-rolled a volley into the window. Jenkins grunted, cursed angrily and staggered away. Gleason and Marshall stood their ground and returned the fire. Miraculously, they were untouched by the blast. They emptied two saddles, saw a horse limp away and suddenly collapse and pin his rider beneath him. The survivors of the band wheeled away.

"Yuh hurt, Jenkins?" Marshall asked.

"One o' them hellions creased m' bum shoulder," the Ranger replied.

"Need 'ny help?"

"Nope. It can't be more'n a scratch. I'll take care uv it later on."

All along the street guns flamed and thundered and filled the air with a deafening din that seemed unending. The fight seemed to range from one end of the street to the other. Then galloping hoofs indicated that the attackers were returning. Dark figures flashed by, firing as they thundered past but from the window a deadly fire took its toll. Riderless horses plunged after their mates.

The three men broke away from the window, threw open the door and poured into the street, snapping shots as the attackers fled. Then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the attack ended. The last of the horsemen spurred away into the night.

THERE was a faint glow of light in the sky when Marshall and Gleason plodded into the office. Jenkins, his shirt off and his right shoulder freshly bandaged, looked up from the chair behind the desk. Gleason slumped down into a chair near the door.

"Wa-al?" Jenkins demanded impatiently. "Where'n hell yuh been all this time? How bad did we come off?"

"One thing at a time," Marshall replied. "F'r yo' inf'mation, Mister . . . we've been tryin' t' git things straightened up. Benton shore made a mess o' things . . . case yuh're int'rested . . . an' we sorta got things t' rights again."

Jenkins gestured impatiently.

"Go on."

"We lost five men."

The Ranger frowned.

"Five, eh?" he repeated. Then quickly, "Burke?"

Gleason looked up then.

"Oh, he's awright," he answered. "Th' little squirt got four o' them hellions by 'imself."

"How many did we git all told?"

Gleason turned to Marshall.

"Seventeen," the latter said briefly.

Jenkins grunted.

"How's yo' arm?" Marshall asked.

"That's right, Jenkins," Gleason said quickly. "See yuh got it bandaged up. How's it feel?"

Jenkins gave them a withering glare.

"Both uv yuh better take 'nother look," he said sharply. "It's m' shoulder. . . . not m' arm . . . an' it's awright."

Gleason grinned up at him.

"Then that's that," he said lightly. The grin vanished almost immediately and he grew serious again. "Benton got what he come after."

The Ranger's eyes widened.

"Yuh mean . . ."

Marshall nodded grimly.

"We found all three o' them jury fellers layin' in front o' th' place where we held court. They were filled full o' lead," he said quietly.

Jenkins sank back in his chair. He shook his head slowly and looked up again presently.

"Wa-al?" he demanded.

"Wa-al what?" Marshall asked.

"What are yuh gonna do about it?" Jenkins demanded.

"Nuthin'," Marshall replied. "Leastways I don't aim t' bite off more'n I c'n chew right now."

"But yuh're plannin' t' do somethin' about it soon, ain'tcha?" the Ranger pressed.

Marshall gave him an icy stare.

"What d'you think?" he retorted.

Jenkins climbed to his feet. He touched his bandaged shoulder tenderly.

"I'm turnin' in," he announced.

He nodded to them, turned and trudged out through the rear door.

CHAPTER XXI

MIKE BURKE, his rifle across his knees, was sitting on the doorstep of Molly Lanning's house when Marshall appeared.

"How's tricks?" the stocky man asked.

"Awright," Marshall answered. He looked up at the house. "Sounds peaceful enough in there."

Burke grinned.

"That's in b'tween snores. That Finneran feller's th' doggonedest snorer I ever heard. When he really gits down t' bus'ness, mister . . . he c'n put a buzz saw t' shame," he said. "Yuh oughta stop by here 'round midnight an' listen to 'im."

"I kinda rec'llect Gleason's tellin' me that yuh do a pretty fair job y'self," Marshall remarked.

Mike bristled with indignation.

"Huh!" He snorted scornfully. "He should talk! Why, that wall-eyed bean pole c'n out-snore me an' Finneran by a hull mile. Th' gall o' him!"

Marshall laughed. He turned when he heard a heavy step on the path. It was Roberts.

"Howdy, Sheriff," the storekeeper said. "Heard yuh were lookin' for me."

Marshall nodded.

"I was," he answered, "but long's yuh're awright, reckon I don't hafta look 'ny further. What become of yuh last night?"

Roberts grinned.

"I got up on th' roof o' my place an' stayed put," he explained. "They busted down th' front door an' turned th' place inside out but I never let on that I heard 'em. Reckon that's why I'm here 'stead o' bein' planted in Boot Hill along with them jury fellers."

Marshall nodded grimly.

"Shore wish they'da done somethin' t' save th'mselves," he said.

"Yuh plannin' t' go after Benton?" the storekeeper asked.

"Course . . . soon's I c'n git s'more men."

Roberts grinned suddenly.

"C'n yuh use me?" he asked.

Marshall eyed him for a moment.

"Yep . . . reckon I can."

"Good. Y'know, Sheriff . . . I got s'me friends in Lodeville. If yuh say th' word I'd like t' go talk t' them. Mebbe I c'n help yuh git a posse t'gether. How 'bout it?"

"I'd shore be obliged to yuh, Roberts," Marshall answered promptly. "Go 'head . . . go far's yuh like."

Roberts nodded to him and turned on his heel.

"I'll be seein' yuh," he said over his shoulder and strode away.

MARSHALL and Jenkins were idling in the open doorway of the office when a big man followed by two husky youths rode up and drew rein. The big man dismounted, hitched up his heavy gun belt and strode to the door. Marshall eyed him.

"Howdy," he said. "Somethin' I c'n do for yuh?"

The man looked up at him.

"Reckon we c'n do somethin' f'r each other," he answered. "I'm Matt White. I'm a friend o' Dan Roberts. Dan was tellin' me that yuh're tryin' t' git a posse t'gether t' go after Greg Benton an' mebbe them hellions in th' hills."

"That's right."

"Wa-al," White continued, "if yuh mean bus'ness an' yuh aim t' make Lodeville a fitten place f'r decent folks t' live in, yuh got y'self three r'cruits. Me an' m' boys . . . that's them waitin' there f'r me . . . we'll back yo' play. When'll yuh want us?"

"Soon . . . I hope."

"Wa-al, soon's yuh're ready t' move, just let Dan know an' he'll see to it that we git word pronto."

"That's mighty decent uv yuh," Marshall answered, "offerin' t' help out."

"It's m' duty," the big man said gravely. "I got a fam'ly an' raisin' 'em 'mong folks that don't hold with law 'n order . . . wa-al, it's shore time somethin' was done 'bout 'em. Lemme hear fr'm yuh, Sheriff."

"Yuh will, White . . . an' much obliged."

"That's awright."

The big man nodded to him, turned and trudged back to his horse, mounted and clattered away. His husky sons turned in their saddles, grinned boyishly at Marshall, swung around again and spurred off.

"Wa-al," Jenkins said with a light laugh, "yo' friend Roberts shore works fast. If he don't run outta wind, th' first thing yuh know he's gonna come paradin' along with a hull posse b'hind 'im."

"That wouldn't s'prise me none," Marshall replied.

Jenkins sauntered past him, turned slowly, casually, and looked up the street. He stared hard for a moment, then he laughed again.

"What'd I just finish sayin'?" he asked, turning to the black-clad man. "Come out here an' take a look f'r y'self."

Marshall crowded past him.

"I'll be doggoned," he muttered and laughed.

A dozen men headed by burly Dan Roberts were striding briskly along the sidewalk in the direction of the office. Other men, some of them lounging in doorways, and some idling along the curb, looked up, exchanged a few bantering remarks with them, then when they had filed past, grinned sheepishly, hitched up their belts and overtook the marchers and fell in behind them. Marshall went forward a bit to meet them. Roberts spied him, quickened his pace and came up to him with a widening grin.

"Sheriff," he said in a loud voice. "Here's part uv yo' posse."

The men halted.

"'Course," Roberts went on with a wink, "they ain't th' pick o' th' crop . . . still, I reckon with a little handlin' yuh oughta be able t' make 'em act like th' real thing."

"I'm glad t' have them, Roberts," Marshall said gravely. "They shore look like real men t' me an' if they're willin' t' take a hand in drivin' Benton an' th' outlaws outta these parts, they're shore enough men."

The storekeeper's face sobered.

"They are that, Sheriff, an' th' longer yuh know 'em . . . th' better yuh'll like each other. Wa-al . . . what d'yuh want 'em t' do?"

"I'd like 'em t' come back t'night at sundown. I want 'em t' come mounted an' with their rifles," Marshall answered.

Roberts wheeled.

"You fellers hear that?" he demanded.

A chorus of "Uh-huh's" and "Yep's" came back to him.

"Awright, then," Roberts went on. "We'll meet in front uv th' Sheriff's office at sundown. Don't f'rgit . . . yuh're all t' bring yo' rifles an' horses. That's all."

The men broke up into small groups. Some of them turned and strolled away. The others waited until Roberts joined them again, gathered around him and followed him away. Other men, some on foot and some on horseback, halted in front of Roberts and demanded to know what was going on. After a minute's conversation he came plodding back to Marshall.

"C'n yuh use s'more men?" he asked. "Seems like everybody wants t' go along . . . now that we've started things movin'. They must be gittin' r'ligion or somethin'."

Marshall laughed.

"We'll need all we c'n git," he replied.

Roberts' eyebrows arched.

"That so? Then I better start circulatin' around again," he said quickly. "I'll be seein' yuh."

"You bet . . . an' thanks."

Roberts grinned at him.

"F'rgit it, Sheriff. Just t' see th' look on Greg Benton's face when he sees these fellers comin' after 'im will be thanks enough f'r me."

He trudged off again and rejoined the waiting possemen and the others. They gathered around him and plied him with questions. Marshall strode back to Jenkins. The latter looked up.

"Shore looks like yuh're doin' awright f'r y'self," he said with a grin.

"Uh-huh . . . thanks t' Roberts. Dunno what I'da done without 'im. C'mon . . . let's go inter th' office. We got plans t' make. Lodeville's ridin' f'r law 'n order t'night an' I don't want 'nythin' t' miss fire."

MARSHALL and Gleason rode steadily southward. The former looked skyward, grunted and slowed the black to a canter. Gleason, watching him, checked his horse's speed, too.

"Reckon we c'n take it easy f'r a spell now," Marshall said presently. "Don't wanna git there till dark, y'know."

Gleason frowned.

"I don't know," he said sharply. "What's th' idea uv us goin' t' Benton's place by ourselves?"

"I've been wonderin' how long yuh could keep fr'm askin'," Marshall answered with a grin. "Y'see, Monte . . . Dave Barry saw Benton's men ridin' north . . . to'ard th' Pass. Benton wasn't with 'em. I figger that Papa's stayin' home t'night . . . by 'imself . . . or mebbe he's got a couple o' men 'round th' place. Anyway, there can't be many uv 'em. We oughta be able t' handle 'em."

Gleason grunted.

"So yuh figgered that while Jenkins attacks fr'm one side an' Mullens an' his Red River posse busts in fr'm their side o' th' Pass, we c'n git Benton an' do th' hull job t'night. That th' big idea?" he demanded.

Marshall looked at him and laughed lightly.

"More or less," he replied.

Gleason brightened up.

"Sounds awright an' it oughta work out awright. How m'ny men has Jenkins got all told?" he asked.

"Thirty-five."

"An' Mullens?"

"'Bout th' same number. 'Course we coulda had more but I figgered we'd better play it safe so I left ten men in town t' sorta look after things. There's allus a chance o' somethin' goin' wrong. I'd hate like hell t' have some o' them outlaws slip past us an' raid th' town while we're away."

"Who'd yuh leave in charge?"

"Yo' ol' boss . . . Jim Stevens."

"That a fact? Then yuh don't hafta worry none," Gleason said quickly, reassuringly. "Jim's awright an' nob'dy's fool."

They slowed their horses to a trot. The black, of course, snorted resentfully, protesting against the idling pace and broke into a brief run again, but Marshall jerked him back sharply. After a minute's tussle the big horse subsided. Gleason watched them with amusement.

"He's allus rarin' t' go an' full o' fight, ain't he?" he asked.

Marshall grinned. He leaned forward in the saddle and patted the black's sleek neck affectionately.

"He's a fightin' fool awright," he said lightly.

The deputy grinned.

"Wa-al, he don't git that fr'm th' wind, y'know," he remarked dryly.

Marshall laughed in reply.

They rode on in silence, swung eastward after a while and reached the woodlands. Gleason looked about him with interest. They dismounted and tethered their horses, then with Marshall in the lead, they made their way forward through the brush to the edge of the wooded section, crouched down and studied the ranch below them. It was evening now and already a veil of darkness was spreading over the earth, dimming and obscuring it from mortal eyes.

There were no outward signs of activity about the place . . . no signs of anything.

"It's deader'n hell down there," Gleason muttered presently. "Shore looks like we just come f'r th' ride."

Marshall delayed his answer for a moment.

"Oh, yeah?" he retorted. "Take another look at th' house. See a tiny light 'round th' back?"

Gleason frowned, eyed him sharply for a moment.

"Th' house, Mister," Marshall said dryly. "Not me."

The deputy turned again, scowled, and studied the house through narrowed eyes. He grunted shortly.

"I see it now," he said briefly.

"Figgered yuh would. Wa-al, soon's it gits dark . . . real dark . . . we'll go a-callin'."

Gleason made no reply. He looked up at the sky, looked southward toward the distant rangelands; turned slowly and looked toward the north, toward the rapidly fading hills. Somewhere in those hills men were squatting and taking their ease around camp-fires while around them, creeping upward as stealthily as they could, were other men, the possemen, encircling them and preparing to fall upon them in a sudden attack.

Night came on now, swiftly and purposeful, blacking out everything. Now too the tiny light at the rear of the house gleamed brighter in the deepening darkness. Marshall got to his feet.

"Stay here," he said briefly.

Gleason swung around.

"Where yuh goin'?" he asked.

"Be back in a minute," Marshall replied.

He wheeled and strode away toward the shadowy trees and disappeared among them. He returned shortly, playing out a long rope. Gleason scrambled to his feet.

"C'mon," Marshall said over his shoulder. "Git ahold o' th' rope an' hang on to it."

The deputy caught up the rope and gripped it and followed Marshall to the edge of the incline above the ranch.

"I'll go down first," Marshall said. "When I jerk th' rope . . . come down."

He stepped past Gleason, turned and backed away, then down into black space. A minute later he jerked the rope sharply. The deputy tightened his grip on it, stepped over the edge of the incline and slowly made his way down. When he reached level ground again, a tall, shadowy figure awaited him.

"Awright?" he heard Marshall ask.

"Shore," was his brief reply.

"Gimme th' end o' th' rope. Don't wanna drop it an' make 'ny noise."

Gleason handed him the end of the coil. Marshall carried it away and put it down noiselessly at the base of the incline, then he retraced his steps.

"Stick close t' me, Monte, an' watch yo' step. Let's go."

CHAPTER XXII

GREG BENTON, a burly and at the moment a scowling and thoroughly annoyed man, paced the floor of his dimly lighted kitchen. The light flickered frequently and cast weird shadows over the ceiling and walls. Benton halted once and looked sharply at the men about him.

A short, heavy-set man with an incredibly thick neck and a puffy, cruel face leaned against one wall. Another man . . . a tall, rangy man with pale blue eyes set in a sun-bronzed face . . . stood near the window. From time to time he turned and looked out. A fourth man sat at the table in the middle of the room. It was Ed Brown, the owner of the Golden Nugget.

"Yuh hear that?" Benton demanded, addressing his question to the two men who were standing. "That Roberts skunk has talked th' men inter formin' a posse an' they're comin' after us."

The thick-necked man grunted. Benton gave him an icy stare.

"Damn it, Bull," he sputtered. "If yuh'da done like I tol' yuh to an' fixed that Roberts feller like yuh done th' others . . . this wouldn'ta happened!"

The man named Bull frowned.

"I tol' yuh we looked all over f'r 'im, didn't I?" he retorted.

Benton lips thinned.

"Mebbe yuh didn't look in th' right places," he snapped. He turned away and paced the floor again. "'Less I do a job m'self, seems like it don't git done right nohow."

The rangy man shoved his hat back from his eyes.

"Th' posse headin' here first . . . or to'ard th' Pass?" he asked.

Brown looked up.

"Far's I know, Tex . . . th' Pass first. Leastways, that's what I un'erstood 'em t' be plannin'," he said in answer.

Benton gestured impatiently.

"What diff'rence does it make which way they're headin' f'r first?" he demanded. "Here or to'ard th' Pass? It don't take brains t' figger out that we'll be a heap safer in th' hills than we are here! We're hightailin' it . . . while we still got th' chance ter. Tex . . . you an' Bull git th' horses." He paused, turned and looked

sharply at Brown. "How 'bout you . . . comin' with us?"

The saloon keeper climbed heavily to his feet.

"'Course I'd like ter, Greg," he began a bit hesitantly, then, "on'y I think I'd better be gittin' back t' town 'fore I'm missed. Y'know, if someb'dy was t' nosey aroun' an' find I wasn't there, right off some smart aleck'd figger that it was me that tipped yuh off t' this here posse bus'ness. Th' way this Marshall feller's got 'em steamed up right now, it might be a little embarrassin' f'r me if they started throwin' questions at me. Un'erstan'?"

Benton eyed him for a moment, then he grunted.

"S'ppose so. Awright, git goin'. Better mind yo' tongue, though."

Brown managed a feeble smile.

"'Course, Greg."

He stepped around the table and looked at Tex. The latter straightened up, shifted his holster to his hip and strode to the door. He opened it, halted in the doorway and turned.

"Comin', Bull?" he asked.

The thick-necked man gave his belt a vicious jerk.

"Comin'," he answered gruffly.

Brown nodded quickly to Benton and headed for the door. He froze in his tracks when a tall, black-clad figure filled the doorway. Brown gulped.

"Goin' somewheres?" Marshall asked lightly.

Tex backed slowly into the room. A brace of heavy black Colts gleamed in Marshall's hands.

"Hoist 'em," he said curtly.

Four pairs of hands went up slowly. Marshall grinned coldly.

"Wa-al, shore looks like yuh've all reached th' end o' th' trail, don't it?" he asked chidingly. "An' you, Mister Brown ..I never figgered on meetin' yuh here. Yuh're kinda lost out here, ain'tcha.... without yo' bar?"

No one answered. Marshall's eyes shifted and focused upon Bull.

"Better keep yo' hands up, Mister," he said coldly. "I don't wanna 'waste good lead on yuh when there's a nice new rope bein readied f'r yuh back in town....t' sorta help yuh 'tone f'r yo' sins."

Bull's beady eyes blazed fiercely. He turned his head slightly, caught Tex's eye and nodded fleetingly. Both men backed away and went for their guns.

There was another door in the room, far beyond them....that led to the living room. It was flung open now and a red-headed figure, gun in hand, burst in. Tex caught a glimpse of Gleason out of a corner of his eye and checked himself although his gun had almost cleared his holster. But it was too late now. Gleason fired twice, one shot hard upon the echo of the preceding one.

Bull's gun flamed from his hip. Marshall's heavy Colts roared and thunder rocked the room. Bull swayed a moment and dropped his gun and went down on all fours. Tex gasped painfully and fell against the wall. He turned slowly presently, toward Gleason, strove doggedly to get his gun out, jerked it free finally and raised it. The deputy fired again. Tex dropped his gun and stumbled away from the wall. He halted shortly, and straightened up, then his legs suddenly buckled beneath him and he toppled over and fell sideways in a heap.

Bull, panting heavily, forced himself up again. He tried desperately to steady himself on faltering legs, drew a deep, sucking breath, glowered and plunged at Marshall. A heavy Colt exploded in Marshall's hand. What had once been Bull's face was now nothing but a bloody smear, featureless and unrecognizable. He grunted, pitched forward and rolled over. His left leg twitched and moved once, but only for an instant, then he lay still.

Now the desperate Benton made his bid for freedom. He whipped out his gun, whirled and sent a bullet into the lamp. Glass and metal crashed to the floor. The room was plunged into darkness. Guns roared again and flame stabbed the darkness. For a brief moment afterwards there was silence . . . a strange, hushed, oppressive silence that hung over the room like a pall . . . then a heavy body struck the table a glancing blow and slid to the floor. presently, too, the table overturned. Some one moaned.

"Monte . . . yuh awright?"

"Shore . . . an' you?"

"Awright. Git 'nother lamp fr'm th' next room, willya?"

"If I c'n find one," Gleason answered.

The door slammed behind him. Minutes passed, then the door was opened again and Gleason appeared, a lighted lamp in

his hand. The yellow rays lent an eerie touch to the scene.

Tex and Bull lay where they had fallen. Benton was sprawled on his back beneath the overturned table. In a far corner of the room lay Ed Brown. He groaned again, feebly.

"Have a look at him," Marshall ordered.

Gleason carried the lamp across the room and bent over Brown. Marshall pushed the table away and looked down at Benton. The man was bullet-riddled . . . and dead. Marshall straightened up and strode over to Brown's side.

"He hit bad?" he asked.

Brown opened his eyes.

"Bad," he whispered and groaned again. "Inside."

"Hold th' lamp higher," Marshall said and bent down.

Gleason raised the lamp a bit. Marshall unbuttoned Brown's shirt. His chest was a smear of blood. Marshall nudged Gleason and pointed to two black-rimmed bullet holes . . . both within an inch of the man's heart. Brown closed his eyes again . . . gently. Marshall climbed to his feet.

"Reckon that's that," he said presently. "He's 'bout done now. Most he'll live 'll be minutes."

They turned away slowly. Gleason placed the lamp on the floor.

"We'll wait, eh?" he asked.

"'Course."

They reloaded their guns, heard a faint gurgle from Brown and strode over to him. Marshall bent over him.

"He's dead," he said simply.

MARSHALL and Gleason rode swiftly through the shadow-shrouded country. Frequently the big black spurted so far ahead of Gleason's mount that Marshall was forced to check him and make him slacken his pace so that the deputy could draw even with them again.

"Marshall!" Gleason yelled. "C'n yuh hear 'nythin'?"

"Nope," Marshall replied. "Not a damned thing. It shore is quiet up ahead. Hope nuthin' went wrong."

They went on again in silence, each listening intently for the expected sound of gunfire from the Pass and the hills. Impatiently they lashed their horses and sent them bounding forward at an even faster gait. The black of course lengthened his stride and promptly dashed ahead of Gleason's mount. It was probably an hour later when they whirled toward the entrance to the hills. Both jerked their horses to a dust-raising halt for the sight that met their eyes was an astonishing one.

A line of horsemen, their guns in their hands, rode out of the hills, wheeled and waited for a column of marching men, closed in around them and escorted them away toward town. Lighted flares stuck into the ground illuminated the scene. A single rider cantered up, wheeled and watched the proceedings, looked up and spied Marshall, whooped and came racing over. It was Smith Jenkins.

"Marshall!" he yelled excitedly. "Yuh shore missed somethin', b'lieve me!"

He pulled up, ranged his horse alongside the black. Gleason, anxious and hungry for news of the surprise attack, edged his mount over too.

"What happened?" Marshall demanded quickly.

Jenkins laughed boyishly.

"Yuh shoulda been here. It was th' doggonedest easiest thing t' pull off that yuh ever heard uv," he began presently. "We s'rrounded 'em . . . like we figgered t' do . . . then we rushed 'em. Heck, it was all over in less'n five minutes . . . th' hull thing."

Marshall relaxed and grinned.

"That's swell. No gun play?" he asked.

Jenkins shook his head.

"Nope," he replied. "Not a single shot."

"So that's why we didn't hear 'nythin'," Marshall mused.

Burly Dan Roberts astride a white horse clattered up. He whirled his horse around when he spied Marshall, rode up to him and laughed.

"Yuh're awright, Sheriff!" he cried. "Everythin' went off just like yuh planned it. What's even better . . . we didn't have a single man git hurt."

"That's swell, Roberts. Git 'em all?"

"Yep . . . every last one o' them. Th' Red River posse got more'n we did . . . forty-two I think it was. We had t' take th' leavin's . . . 'bout thirty."

"Includin' a couple o' Benton's hired hands," Jenkins put in.

"What's Mullens doin' with his pris-'ners?" Marshall asked. "Takin' 'em back t' Red River?"

The Ranger nodded.

"Uh-huh. Mullens says he c'n use 'em

buildin' a road. Meanwhile he's sendin' out notices t' all th' Sheriffs 'round, d'scribin' th' critters caught an' givin' their names an' askin' th' Sheriffs t' come an' git whichever ones they've been lookin' f'r. Good idea, ain't it?"

"Shore is," Marshall answered. "Oughta do th' same with our'n."

Jenkins grinned boyishly.

"We are . . . a'ready. Stevens is doin' it right now. He's over at yo' office sendin' out th' notices."

"Sheriff," Roberts said. "What about Benton?"

Jenkins looked up sharply.

"That's right, doggone it. I almost f'rgot 'bout him."

"Huh? Oh."

The Ranger frowned.

"Don't stall. Yuh got 'im, didn't yuh?" he demanded.

"Shore we got 'im," Marshall said casually.

Jenkins eyed him for a moment.

"Gunplay, eh?"

"Some."

"How much?"

"Just 'nough t' kill four men. There were two o' Benton's men with 'im . . . an' Ed Brown . . . th' feller that owned th' Golden Nugget."

"Ed Brown, eh?" Roberts repeated. "Y' know, Sheriff, I never did have 'ny use f'r that maverick. He was allus sidin' in with Benton. So he's dead too."

"Dead's he'll ever be," Gleason said briefly.

The last of the horsemen and their prisoners plodded off toward town. The four wheeled their mounts and clattered away after them.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE following morning Lodeville's late risers were awakened from their slumbers by an unholy racket that ranged from one end of the street to the other. The aforementioned stumbled to their windows and thrust their heads out and beheld a most amazing scene of industry being enacted and unfolded before their red-rimmed eyes. Some of the beholders blinked in the bright sunlight, took another look and decided it was just a mirage . . . the noise was just the little men scampering after the pink elephants which somehow always appeared after a prolonged session with a bottle. Some of the more natural late sleepers rubbed their eyes, looked a second time and finally decided it wasn't a mirage but a reality. The latter group awoke with a start, turned away from their windows and piled into their clothes and dashed off for a closer view of the miracle.

When they reached the street they found groups of men wielding hammers and repairing sundry buildings and store fronts. Other men were ripping out the remains of shattered windows, tossing the bits aside. The ensuing crash added to the general clatter and din. Across the street . . . and up and down the street . . . men were busily engaged in painting . . . a hitherto unheard of extravagance in Lodeville where everything, in time, became one color . . . sun-faded.

Finneran's place was one of those being painted and its owner, his right arm in a sling, was standing at the curb and watching the work with a critical eye. Roberts' windows were being replaced and inside the general store the burly Dan was knee-deep in merchandise to be returned to boxes and shelves and counters.

The scene of the greatest activity was the Golden Nugget. Passersby stopped for a moment's look but the saloon's regular patrons panted up and crowded them out of the way and gaped at what they saw.

The sign in front of the place had already been altered. The word "Golden" had been left untouched. "Nugget" had been painted out and in its place two freshly printed words gleamed in their newness . .

"Golden Rule School," one man read aloud. He shook his head sadly. "Wa-al, I'll be doggoned."

Evidently he expressed the bewilderment and perhaps the consternation of the other citizens who merely grunted and nodded.

Inside the place a dozen men were at work, wrecking the bar and dragging the pieces outside. A view of the ruins made more of the men shake their heads and sigh. By this time the whole town was not only awake but outdoors and late arrivals ran up and demanded to know "what'n hell's goin 'on 'round here?" Few bothered to answer orally. All they did was bestow a withering stare upon their questioners and finally nod toward the place, leaving it to them entirely to study, stare and blink when they regained some form

of consciousness and understanding of what was going on.

Farther down the street, in front of the vacant building in which Curt Benton had been tried for Lee Simms' killing, half a dozen armed men loitered. They were the guards for the outlaws captured in the surprise attack the previous night.

Marshall sauntered along the street toward the office. A heavily laden, canvas-topped prairie schooner rumbled along the rutted street and braked to a rasping stop. A man on the driver's seat spied Marshall.

"Sheriff!" he yelled through cupped hands.

Marshall halted and turned.

"Yeah?"

"C'n yuh c'mere a minute?"

Marshall nodded and strode over. The man slid over to the end of the seat and leaned forward.

"Sheriff," he said quickly. "I'd like f'r yuh t' meet m' wife." He turned. "Here he is, Annie."

A woman with a young but tired face poked her bonneted head through the canvas folds. She smiled wanly. Marshall took off his hat.

"Howdy, Ma'm. Glad t' know yuh," he said gravely.

"Sheriff," the man said again, eagerly. "Willya tell 'er that Lodeville's changed? That it ain't a-tall like what it uster be?"

Marshall smiled.

"Reckon, Ma'm, yuh c'n see f'r y'selt what's goin' on 'round here . . . if yuh'll look 'long th' street. We're doin' our best t' make Lodeville what it's s'pposed t' be . . . a fitten place f'r decent folks t' live in. F'r instance, Ma'm . . . that buildin' down there . . . that used t' be a s'loon. See that sign 'bove it?"

The woman's eyes followed Marshall's pointing finger.

"Golden Rule School," she read aloud.

"There yuh are," her husband said triumphantly. "Just what I tol' yuh, Annie. First thing, y'know, some feller'll come along an' build us a church, too . . . eh, Sheriff?"

"Wouldn't be a-tall s'prised," he answered.

The man gathered up the reins again.

"Much obliged, Sheriff."

"That's awright."

MARSHALL nodded to them, put on his hat and strode away. Presently the wagon rumbled on again. Marshall trudged into the office, halted in the doorway. Gleason was standing just inside the door, leaning idly against the wall. Molly Lanning was sitting near the desk while stocky Mike Burke, this time without his rifle, was perched on the edge of the desk. The three of them looked up.

"There's th' Boss now," Mike said with a grin.

"Howdy," Marshall said. He shoved his hat back from his eyes and rested his hands on his hips. "Wa-al, what's goin' on here? Holdin' a meetin'?"

Molly smiled.

"Hardly. The boys insisted that I come right over to see the school," she answered.

"I see. 'Course it ain't much t' look at yet with all that paintin' an' work t' be done inside. Give us a couple o' more days, then yuh'll be able t' see somethin'."

"I think it's wonderful," Molly said quickly, "as it is."

Gleason straightened up.

"Wa-al, see you folks later on," he said. He looked over at Burke. "Comin', Mike?"

"What f'r?" the stocky deputy demanded. "I'm plumb wore out doin' guard duty. I'm gonna rest f'r a while."

Gleason frowned.

"Got somethin' f'r yuh t' do," he said curtly. "Outside."

Burke glared at him.

"Doggone it," he muttered, "there's allus someb'dy got somethin' f'r me t' do."

He got to his feet, hitched up his belt and sauntered forward. When he reached the door Gleason shoved him out, grinned at Molly, backed out and slammed the door shut. Marshall came around the desk and sat down. For a moment there was silence.

"You're going away?" Molly asked presently.

He looked up. Their eyes met.

"T' California," he said simply.

"Jenkins told me," she said just as simply.

There were some papers on the desk and he fumbled with them, straightened them up, smoothed out the corners that had been folded down.

"Reckon I've done m' job here," he said, "so I might's well go on like I planned."

She made no answer . . . looked away.

"S'ppose yuh find it hard t' figger that out . . . why I should want t' go on 'stead o' stayin' put here?" he asked gently.

She faced him again.

"I think I do understand."

He seemed surprised at her reply.

"Yuh do?"

"Yes. You didn't know my father. He was like that . . . like you. Ever since he was a boy he wanted to go on and on . . . always looking for something yet never fully knowing just what it was. It was in his blood, I guess . . . just as it is in yours."

She arose slowly.

"He didn't go very far," she went on quietly. "He met my mother and . . . well, he couldn't after that. Mother wasn't very strong and he realized it and settled down. But it wasn't what he wanted. Mother knew it. She told me later on. But Father thought no one else sensed what he was dreaming of. Sometimes I think it would have been a lot fairer to him . . . if he hadn't met my Mother . . . if he had gone on and on as he hoped to. Father and I never discussed it but I think I understood him and appreciated what he had done. I think I can safely say that I understand you, too."

The door opened and Smith Jenkins came in. He halted in the doorway and looked from Molly to Marshall.

"Oh, excuse me. I'll come back later on," he said quickly, and turned to go.

"Yuh needn't go," Marshall called. "Reckon we've 'bout said all there was t' say."

"Yes," Molly added with a smile, "we'd just finished."

She glanced at Marshall and turned toward the door. Marshall came around the desk and followed her. She halted in the doorway and turned to him.

"When do you plan to go?"

"T'night," he replied.

"Must you . . . so soon?"

Their eyes met again . . . for the last time.

"Reckon it'll be better that way," he said quietly.

She gave him her hand. For a moment they clasped hands in silence, then she withdrew her hand and went out.

GLEASON and Jenkins rode with him through the silent, moon-lit Pass. They halted once and looked back, then when Marshall turned and settled himself in his saddle, they did likewise. Iron shoes rang out sharply as the three horses clattered over rock and shale. They rode through the hushed summits of the Pass, emerged on the far side and halted again. The road dipped down sharply and wound away into the darkness ahead. Marshall wheeled the black.

"Wa-al," he said presently, "reckon this is as far's yuh go. Take care o' that Sheriff's badge, Monte."

Gleason grinned. His teeth shone brightly in the night light.

"I will, Marshall. I'll save th' polishin' uv it 'till Mike Burke's around. That'll git 'im."

They gripped hands.

"So long."

"So long."

Gleason wheeled his horse and rode back into the echoing Pass. Jenkins edged his mount closer to the black.

"I won't say g'bye t' yuh," he said with a grin. "Like's not we'll be meetin' again somewheres soon."

"Quien sabe?"

"Who knows is right."

The Ranger thrust out his hand. Marshall's hand clasped it.

"Adios."

"Adios, Marshall."

They parted and wheeled their horses again, Jenkins' toward the Pass, Marshall's toward the west. Jenkins halted again presently, just inside the Pass, and looked back over his shoulder. Marshall was gone. The Ranger spurred his mount and clattered away.

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TORMENT TRAIL

by HUGH B. CAVE

From the dim backtrail came a grim obligation, and Tom Murray thought himself unable to meet it. . . . But through torment and torture, bullets and blood, he finds himself—all man!

TOM MURRAY had faced no tougher assignment in seven years of being Deputy Marshal. He hated it. He hated himself for the sudden treacherous impulse that had prompted him to ask for it.

But he had asked for it, and now there was no way out.

Riding into Redwing that morning, he savagely slapped the desert dust from his legs and made for the town saloon. That was significant. Drinking so early in the day was not a

habit with him, but he intended now to get drunk. Only with liquor in him could he go through with the job.

He drank, but the whisky stuck in his throat and was no help at all. It served only to bring back memories. Angry with himself, Murray marched down the street to the office of Redwing's sheriff, to get the ugly business over with.

Legally, of course, there was nothing amiss in his requesting assistance from the local authorities. He reminded himself of this, and tried hard to concentrate on it. A deputy marshal was not supposed to be a lone wolf, and he knew mighty little about Redwing except that the man he sought owned a small cattle ranch south of town.

Still, he hesitated before rapping the door with his knuckles. This, he knew, was the final step, from which there could be no turning back.

He knocked, and a moment later was face to face with Redwing's sheriff.

They had nothing in common, these two. Murray was a tall, too-thin man of thirty, with sober gray eyes in a face that seemed incapable of smiling. Lew Gregg was large and slovenly, with shifty eyes, unclean nostrils, a thick mouth stained brown by tobacco juice.

Here, Murray decided, was a man without much conscience. He felt relieved. At the same time he felt that in associating with Gregg he was sinking to a new low, and despised himself for it.

"I'm Tom Murray, Deputy Marshal."

With just a trace of respect, Lew Gregg replied, "What can I do for you?"

"The government wants Andrew Higginson," Murray declared.

Gregg stiffened in his chair. His fingers curled on the top of his desk and he leaned forward, peering eagerly into his visitor's face. More than ever, Murray disliked him. At that moment Gregg's features were more animal than human, and were marked with an uncouth kind of hunger.

"What's Andy Higginson done, Marshal?" the sheriff demanded.

"I'm afraid that's Uncle Sam's business," said Murray curtly.

The rebuke made little impression. Gregg leaned back, smiling an ugly smile. "I reckon it don't make much difference. So you want Andy arrested, eh?"

"And I want my name kept out of it."

"You do? Why?"

"That's government business, too, Gregg."

It wasn't, of course. It was strictly personal, but the less Gregg knew about that, the better. Murray stood up, scowling. He had carried out his intentions and now wanted nothing more than to get out of Lew Gregg's presence. With one hand on the door, he turned.

"When you get your man, Gregg, come looking for me at the hotel."

He went out. Hating himself for a skunk and a coward, he returned to the Redwing Saloon.

The place was empty, this time of day. The barkeep made an indifferent effort to start a conversation, gave it up as a bad job and left Murray to his own devices. Tom Murray retired to a corner table and applied himself to the business of getting drunk.

YOU had to go back seven years to find the root of the deputy marshal's anguish. Looking back that far, you saw Tom Murray at

twenty-three, a lank, tow-headed cowpoke known far and wide as a man who could consume more liquor, laugh louder, fight harder, ride faster, and quit a job quicker than any other hombre alive.

You saw with him a slender, dreamy-eyed young fellow name of Andy Higginson, and the two were inseparable. When money ran out, they worked together. When one tired of a job, they rode on together in search of new horizons.

And when Marian Steele stepped into their lives, they both, as a matter of course, made love to her.

She was the daughter of Big John Steele, owner of the J-S spread in the Dishpan. At nineteen she was the most beautiful thing Tom Murray and Andy Higginson had ever encountered—and that was saying something. The blue of her eyes was the blue of those distant horizons they'd been so aimlessly seeking. Her smile anchored them to John Steele's ranch. Her hair had gold in it, and she was slim and graceful as a doe.

She picked Andy, but it was a toss-up. A smile from Lady Luck could have tipped the scales in Tom Murray's favor just as easily. She became Mrs. Andy Higginson, and Big John Steele turned over to them, for a starter, his Redwing holdings. And Tom Murray rode on alone, the loneliest man in America.

Now, in the Redwing Saloon, Tom Murray drank to get drunk. He tried hard to remember he was a deputy United States marshal, with a duty to perform, and in the performance of that duty there could be nothing personal.

He tried to forget that he still carried with him, in a dog-eared billfold, a picture of Andy Higginson's wife.

"Is it my fault the law caught up with him?" he muttered.

It wasn't his fault. It was just one of those things. "Matter of fact," Murray thought sullenly, "I could have set the law onto him years ago. I could have stopped him from marrying Marian. All these years I've kept my mouth shut, haven't I?"

Because of the liquor, this line of thinking gave him a certain surly satisfaction. Facts were facts, and he found comfort in them. He could have set the law onto Andy years ago; that was God's truth. And he could have done so without an ounce of danger to himself, because on the night of the trouble, he'd had an airtight alibi.

"Nor can I be blamed for letting Andy ride out alone that night," he told himself, scowling at his whisky. "How was I to know a quiet, steady man like him would all of a sudden bust a girt and go haywire?"

Andy Higginson had ridden out of Cedar Bend that night to visit a girl, and later on had told Murray everything that happened. The girl wasn't anything special; she was just a pleasant, pretty little thing with whom Andy had struck up a casual acquaintance.

Her pa was a nester who'd got started in the cattle business a few years back by rounding up unbranded strays. A hard man, folks said, and mean as poison when liquored.

Andy brought the girl home a mite later than the old man thought was right and proper. That started it. The old man was liquored and ugly. He shoved Andy aside and took a horsewhip to the girl, and the more she screamed, the meaner he got.

That was a bad spot for Andy Higginson. He was a quiet lad, and since the girl meant nothing serious to him, he was loath to get mixed up

in what looked like trouble. He stood it as long as he could. Then he blew up, and like most quiet men when they explode, he blew wide open.

They fought it out, he and the old man, like mountain cats. The old man used the butt of his whip, and Andy used his fists—and the girl huddled in a corner, her eyes big with terror. When Andy departed, the girl's pa was a senseless heap on the floor.

Next day he died.

THE girl could have told who did it, of course, but she never opened her mouth. Either she was fonder of Andy than he was of her, or she was just plain grateful to him for ridding the world of her no-good pa. At any rate, she told the Cedar Bend sheriff she didn't know a thing about it, or how it happened, or who did it, and when Andy Higginson and Tom Murray rode out of town a day later, no one molested them.

Now, here in Redwing, that ghost of the half-forgotten past had come up along Andy's trail to haunt him.

"And me," Tom Murray muttered, "I had to stick my face into it. I had to be smart!"

Half drunk, he took to wondering why, after all these years, the girl in the case had suddenly seen fit to expose him. "It don't seem right nor just," he thought bitterly. "Had she done her talking when it happened, the facts might have given Andy a fair chance for acquittal. Now the facts are rusted and dull; only the killing itself sticks out. But it isn't my problem . . ."

He had a problem, though, and tried to be hard-headed about it. Tried to keep his mind on it, letting the liquor wash away all the shadows that threatened to fog the main issue. "I got to keep my face and name out of this," he savagely told himself, "and let the law take its course. There's no way of helping Andy. I thought there might be, when I asked for this job—but now I know different. And if I do the dirty work myself, Marian will look on me like she would a snake."

That was it. The thought was out in the open now, and he could face it. He wanted Andy Higginson's wife. Her picture was in his billfold. He'd never forgotten her. And now, with Andy destined to be pushed aside, he was the natural one for Marian to turn to.

That thought had been with him from the start, eating at him. "What's wrong with it?" he demanded now, staring red-eyed at his liquor. "What's wrong with picking up the chips where they fall?"

Not quite drunk but not altogether sober, Murray hung around town that afternoon. Two or three times he saw Lew Gregg, and realized that the sheriff was waiting for dark before riding out to the Higginson place. That was all right with Murray. If the sheriff went out there in daylight there might be trouble; someone might get hurt; then he, as deputy marshal in charge of proceedings, would have to step in and exercise his authority—and he did not want that.

About dusk, hungry, he found a restaurant at the lower end of the town's main drag—a large, glittery place with bar and dance floor—and ensconced himself in a booth. A girl came out onto the floor and sang while he was attacking his steak. The light was bad, and after a casual glance he paid no further attention.

She sang cheap songs, off-color parodies on some of the old-time favorites. She began to dance, and that was off-color, too. The dance

brought her close to Murray's booth, and suddenly he lost interest in his meal. He just stared.

"So that's it," he thought. "That's how it happened!"

SHE had grown up, of course, since he had known her in Cedar Bend. She had filled out and was plump, but in a made-up way was still kind of pretty. When her number was over, Murray signaled a waiter and said quietly, "Tell that girl I want to see her."

The waiter hesitated, and he showed his badge. Reluctantly, the waiter said, "All right, mister."

She did not recognize Tom Murray at first. Frowning, she slid into the booth and sat down, put her elbows on the narrow table and stared at him. Recognition came quickly, though, and her eyes widened.

"What do you want?" she asked uneasily.

"How long have you been around here, Sally?"

"I . . . what difference does that make? I got a right to be here, haven't I?"

The years had hardened more than her looks, Murray realized, and he was at a loss to know how to take her. In dealing with women, he was apt to be clumsy.

He said, "Why did you turn on Andy Higginson after all these years, Sally?"

She shrugged, looked away. "I figured it was time I got a break." Her gaze swivelled slowly to Murray's face again, and was hostile. "Life hasn't been any bed of roses, you know. Or do you know?"

"I can see. But how would turning on Andy help you any?"

"Because it——" She caught herself and stood up. "I'll tend to my business, Mr. Deputy Marshal. You tend to yours." Before Murray could restrain her, she had gone.

He finished his meal and went out, more troubled than he liked to admit. This affair seemed to have complications. Maybe he was getting into water that would turn out to be too deep for him. He thought of Marian Higginson and was suddenly afraid that the storm he had set in motion might sweep everything, including her, in front of it.

Redwing's main street was dark now. He looked up at the windows of Lew Gregg's office as he went past. They, too, were dark. He went along to the hotel.

A young man, solemn and staring, rose from a chair in the lobby and stepped forward. "You're Tom Murray, ain't you, Mister?"

Murray looked him over and nodded. The young man handed him an envelope. "This here is from my boss, Andy Higginson."

Murray's fingers trembled as he tore that envelope open. It was almost like shaking hands with his old side-kick again. He wondered how Andy had known....and the letter answered the question for him.

"Dear Tom," it said, "the youngster I'm sending this by saw you in town this morning and recognized you from the picture that hangs on our parlor wall. I guess I know why you're here, Mister.

"How this all happened—Sally got a job in Redwing some months ago, and we happened to meet on the street. It was sheer accident. I don't suppose she'd given me a thought all these years, until that morning we met. Nothing would have come of it, I'm sure, only Lew Gregg saw us and hating me like poison, he made it his business to find out what the connection was.

"Sally asked me for money as a

price for silence. I refused. Money never solves a problem like mine for very long, and I could see the writing on the wall anyhow. Sure enough, Lew Gregg got it out of her and passed the word along to the people you work for—that fight having occurred, as you recall, on government range.

"There's only one way out, Tom, and I'm taking it. All I ask is that you make it as easy for Marian as you can—and see that she's taken care of. You're the man to do that, Tom. She never really knew which of us to pick in the first place.

"So long, Pardner. Give me till sun-up tomorrow morning, then ride out and take over. I won't be here to shake your hand, but I won't have run away, either. Not far, anyhow."

TOM MURRAY stood like wood for a minute, just staring at the scrawl that was Andy's signature. The significance of that letter was a staggering blow to the heart. It was a blinding flame that seared him, cleansed his mind. He saw himself, suddenly, for what he was.

He turned on the young man who had delivered the note. "You tell Andy to wait! You hear me? Tell him to wait!" Then Murray ran.

He guessed he was too late when he found the door of Lew Gregg's office locked. Ten minutes of frantic searching proved it. Gregg had been seen riding out of town half an hour before, with a posse.

Pale and shaking, Murray inquired how far it was to the Higginson place. "A good two hours," he was told.

He made for the restaurant where he'd eaten supper, crystal clear now the knowledge of what he had to do. Strangely enough, he felt good about it. All his bitterness had dropped from him, like a strangling noose cut by the flash of a knife.

But was there time?

In the next five minutes he talked harder and faster than in any previous hour of his turbulent thirty years. Then he rode, and his riding was as hard and fast as his talking. Beside him rode someone else, dazed and bewildered.

They ate up the dark stretch of distance between Redwing and the Andy Higginson place in just over an hour. But when they topped the last low rise and saw the lights of the ranch house, and the shadowed shapes of horses tied to the veranda rail, Murray knew they were too late. Lew Gregg had ridden fast, too.

"I'll ride in alone," he said. "You follow along after me, slow." He urged his lathered mount down the slope, flung himself from the saddle and strode up the veranda steps. The door was open a bit, and he heard loud voices from the parlor.

He walked in, mechanically hitching his holster closer to his beltbuckle.

That was a strange scene he walked in on. Nothing much was happening, but it was like a slow-burning fuse attached to a powder keg; plenty was *about* to happen. Lew Gregg and four hard-looking men confronted Andy Higginson. Off to one side, white and scared, stood Marian.

Lew Gregg was sneering, "I been waiting months for this, Higginson. Now it'll be my pleasure to see you hang!"

They turned at Tom Murray's entrance. Most surprised of all, probably, was Marian. She gasped and called him by name, and there was more than astonishment in her voice; there was anguish and a sob of hope. Gregg was surprised, too, but in a

different fashion. He bent his tobacco-stained mouth to a scowl. "What do *you* want?" he demanded.

Murray looked them over with cold gray eyes. "It's my job," he said, "to keep law and order. What's the meaning of this, Gregg? Why are you molesting this man and his wife?"

"Why am I—?" Gregg's unlovely face came near bursting with amazement. "Why, you....this man's a killer and you know it! You sent me here!"

"Did I? I don't seem to recall it."

"Damn you, Murray, you can't get away with this!" Bristling like a porcupine, Gregg looked to his dour-faced companions for moral support. "Higginson killed Sally Evart's old man, and you know it!"

"Who says he did, Gregg?"

"*She* does!"

MURRAY stepped to the door and said quietly to someone waiting outside, "Come in here, Sally." He put a hand on the girl's arm and felt her tremble as he drew her into the room. "No one's going to hurt you, Sally. We just want you to answer a question."

The girl stared wide-eyed at that roomful of people, all of whom were watching her. She was scared. Her face had been flushed a while ago from the hard ride out from Redwing, but now it was white and drawn.

"How did your pa die, Sally?" Murray asked.

"He—had a fight with a man and died from the beating he got."

"What was that man's name, Sally?"

Sally Evart hesitated, then suddenly looked straight at Gregg. Her lip trembled. "Andy Higginson!" she cried.

Lew Gregg relaxed, a mirthless grin twisting his lips. But Tom Murray continued quietly, "This man's name is Andy Higginson, too, Sally." He drew her toward Andy. "Is this the man?"

"Him?" said Sally, frowning. "No!"

"You see, Gregg, it's just one of those things. Happenstance, that's all. Two men with the same name."

Lew Gregg's face was scarlet. "It's a lie, a dirty lie!" he bellowed. "She's a no-good, double-crossing tramp! She——"

"That word 'tramp' is mighty flexible, Gregg. Some girls are just naturally bad, maybe. Others get pushed around by their luck and fall into kind of shady ways in their struggle to keep alive. You want to remember that, and learn to differentiate."

"Very pretty speech," Gregg snarled. "I still say she's a tramp!"

Murray sighed a little and put Sally behind him. "In that case," he declared, "I'll be forced to teach you some manners. No man calls my future wife a tramp, Lew."

Lew Gregg's amazement kept him from drawing his gun. As for the others, Murray had already sized them up. They were an unsavory lot, but hardly fond of their blustering leader, and not likely to risk their necks for him by tangling with a man who wore Uncle Sam's badge.

His own gun was still in its holster when Murray stepped up to his man and went to work.

He got keen satisfaction out of that fight. It rid his mind of the few remaining shadows that tormented him. It wiped out ugly memories and cleaned the slate for a fresh start. With swift, savage blows he broke through Gregg's defense, thwarted the big man's bull-

like rushes and knocked him sprawling.

Then he picked Gregg up and shook him.

"My advice to you, Gregg, is to clear out of Redwing. I learned considerable about your shady doings from Sally, and it's plain to see you had it in for Andy because he was doing his honest best to rid the town of you. Get out, Gregg." He sent the big man sprawling again, this time over the threshold.

LEW GREGG picked himself up. His gun was still holstered and for a moment he swayed there in the doorway, his red eyes full of hate. His hand hovered for an instant over the gun-butt. But Murray stared him down.

With a beaten snarl, Gregg turned tail—a move that spelled his finish in the critical eyes of his cronies. They followed him in eloquent silence.

"That," said Murray, "will be the end of him." He leaned against the wall and stared at Andy and Marian Higginson. They hadn't changed much, he realized. Andy had changed hardly at all. Marian had filled out a little, like Sally, but was still breathtakingly sweet and lovely.

He held out his hands. "It's mighty nice to see you folks again," he said. Then he drew Sally Evart forward. "What I said about getting married is on the level. I want you to meet my girl."

For just a minute Sally faced them. Then the quiet, homey atmosphere of the room and the deep, quiet goodness of these people got the best of her. Her eyes filled with tears and she turned away. "No," she said, sobbing. "I can't do it. I can't hold you to any promise like that. You....what you said about being no good...."

Tom Murray scowled at her and remembered those hectic moments in the restaurant. Every second then had seemed a lifetime, with Andy Higginson's future at stake. He had begged this girl for help. Guessing the reason for her downfall, he had made the one offer likely to sway her. He had promised security.

Now, with more time for thinking, he stared through the girl's tears and recalled his little speech to Gregg. He hadn't meant much by that speech. Just words. But as he turned Sally to face him, he knew that there'd been a lot of truth in those words.

"Most any of us can lean a little to the wrong side now and then, Sally. I ought to know, I guess." He tipped her chin so she had to look up at him, had to face him through the tears. "Anyhow, Tom Murray keeps his promises. Especially when he wants to."

THE END

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HORNED JUSTICE

by STEPHEN PAYNE

Justice may be stone blind, but in this case she shore exhibited a mighty keen sense of smell!

CHARLIE COYLE said, "That bull smells blood."

"Now what makes you think so?" Nelse Frame, beside the young cowhand on the buckboard seat, threw him an odd glance. "We're at least a mile from the critter. But you hear him bawling and you say he smells blood."

"It's that sort of wild, fierce tone the bull's putting into his bellow," Coyle replied. "Sends a chill down your back like hearing a wolf pack on a stormy night." With a reminis-

cent smile, he added, "I've worked around stock all my life."

"I wasn't doubting but what you had," said Frame. "When I hired you there in Red Mound this morning you told me you were a cowhand, but that you'd take any kind of a job."

Coyle merely nodded. No need of his telling this heavy-set rancher with the inscrutable brown eyes that he, Charlie Coyle, had had a reason for coming to the town of Red Mound and that he had welcomed the chance to take a job on the Two In A Box ranch. It was lucky for him that Frame had been in town and looking for a hand.

The rancher had said, "I'm a-horseback now, but I'll drive in this evening to take you out to my place, if you'll wait that long."

To this Coyle had readily agreed and, during the day, he had refused two other offers of work—riding jobs, the kind he would have liked. He had also tightened his belt to take the place of dinner and of supper, for he was dead-broke as usual.

Riding now with Frame in the buckboard, he looked up at the star-studded sky and wondered why the ranchman had been so late in coming to Red Mound with his rig? Here it was almost midnight. But at last they were driving into the yard at Frame's Two In A Box ranch.

Less than five minutes later and before they had even unhitched the team, the rancher and his new hired man discovered that Nelse Frame's Hereford bull had, to all appearances, gored a man to death in the corral.

The animal was still bawling and pawing dirt and otherwise indicating that he was "right on the fight." But Frame attracted the brute's attention while Coyle entered the corral and carried out the mangled body.

"It's—it's my neighbor and friend, Jim McDonough," Frame gasped. "How could this have happened? You look around, Coyle, while I whip my team back to town to bring out the sheriff and the coroner."

"Do that," said Coyle. His lips and his features both locked, he went to the house, found a blanket and covered the lifeless man. Considering it advisable not to "cut for sign" until the Law arrived, he started a fire and cooked a meal in Frame's bachelor establishment. Yet despite his hunger the food almost choked him.

Upon his new employer's return with the sheriff and the coroner, Charlie Coyle learned that Frame and McDonough had not always been friendly. But they had buried the hatchet and been like brothers, ever since—as Sheriff Ordway pointed out significantly—McDonough had gotten married, two years ago.

SINCE that eventful day, these neighbors had been helping each other with their work, branding calves, fixing fences, cleaning out ditches and so forth. Also they had been swapping beef back and forth; Frame butchering a yearling or calf and McDonough taking half the carcass and the other way around.

According to Frame's story of what had taken place on this particular evening he had driven his buckboard up the creek to McDonough's ranch, about five o'clock, to help McDonough butcher a calf. Mrs. McDonough was in Red Mound having dental work done, and was not expected home for two or three days.

Frame and McDonough butchered a calf in McDonough's corral and McDonough caught the blood in a bucket to make a pudding he liked. At least, so he told Frame, who laughed about it. Frame loaded his half of

the calf's carcass in his buckboard on a tarpaulin, then had supper with McDonough and sat around the stove smoking and talking until after nine o'clock.

Frame, so he said, recalled telling his neighbor about the new Hereford bull he'd bought over in another county and learned, after he paid for the animal, and to his great surprise, of its reputation as a man killer.

McDonough had shown great interest, asking how Frame managed to drive and handle such a vicious bull.

"I told him," said Frame, "I could drive the critter a-horseback all right by using rocks and a whip on him and as for handling him afoot, I've got a long rod to snap into the ring in Mister Bull's nose. It's a spring snap with a string fastened to the trigger and running up the rod, so you can pull this string and release the snap from the ring without getting close to the bull when you want to turn him loose.

"What with all this talk about the bull," Frame continued his story to Coyle, the sheriff and the coroner, "I forgot to mention to McDonough that I was driving to Red Mound yet tonight to bring out a new hired hand."

Charlie Coyle made a mental note of this remark and then listened attentively to the rest of Frame's story.

Leaving McDonough's ranch Frame had driven home to the Two In A Box in his buckboard. He pulled up alongside the corral where the bull was imprisoned, tied his team and carried his half of the recently butchered calf to a shed. Next he carried a forkful of hay from his barn to the bull's pen.

"I don't have to water the critter," the man stated, "because one of my corrals runs down across the creek—same creek that flows past McDonough's ranch—and by opening a gate I can let the bull go to a water hole in this other corral.

"After feeding the bull, I untied my team and drove to Red Mound where I picked up my new hand, Charlie Coyle. And now," Frame concluded, "Coyle can tell you what we found here when we got home."

At the first hint of daylight, Coyle, Sheriff Ordway and the coroner visited McDonough's J Bar D ranch, where they found tracks of both ranchers in the corral where the calf had been butchered and in the yard the tracks of Frame's rig and team. From the number of dirty dishes in the kitchen the two ranchers had evidently eaten supper together.

RETURNING to the Two In A Box, Frame's ranch, the investigators found, at the edge of the creek where Frame's corral jutted out across it, a pair of hip rubber boots. These were McDonough's boots the sheriff, the coroner and Nelse Frame agreed, and it seemed certain that McDonough had waded down stream from his ranch to Frame's. Upon reaching Frame's corral it appeared equally certain that the man left his rubber boots, put on his shoes, and walking along the fence—thus leaving no tracks—arrived at the bull's corral.

Outside this particular corral, as if someone had reached down from the fence and placed it there, Coyle and the other investigators found a ten pound lard bucket partly full of blood. In the bucket was a small paint brush, the initials, 'J. M.' cut in its handle with a jackknife.

McDonough had not left a single track outside that corral. But inside it, McDonough's rope—the sheriff,

coroner and Frame knew it to be his —was on the bull's horns, the other end of it trailing in the dirt. The bull's horns and head were covered with blood and dirt; the animal was still in a savage mood.

After the men had looked at everything they could find to throw light on the horrible death of McDonough, they were reluctantly forced to conclude that McDonough had intended to do away with Frame and make it appear that the bull was guilty of this murder.

They surmised that McDonough had intended to tie up the bull and smear blood on its horns, thus enraging the animal. The bull would then begin to bellow and paw and this would bring Frame running out to the corral to see what was wrong. (McDonough, of course, thought Nelse Frame was alone on the ranch; didn't know he had gone to town.)

Immediately Frame reached the dark corral, McDonough had intended to knock him unconscious, then heave the man's body over the fence into the corral and cut his rope, if it was still on the bull's horns.

After this, McDonough had only to smooth out any tracks he might have left, pick up his bucket of blood and his rope, walk along the fence to the creek, put on his rubber boots and go home leaving no tracks or other evidence that might implicate him in any manner.

However, if McDonough had planned all this, he had made one slip fatal to himself. He had gone into the corral with the bull.

"Poetic justice," Sheriff Ordway remarked.

But, after the lawman and the coroner had taken the body of Jim McDonough to Red Mound and Nelse Frame had ridden to the same town to break the tragic news to Mrs. McDonough, Coyle evolved a new theory of what might actually have happened last night on these two ranches.

After helping to butcher the calf at the J Bar D, Nelson Frame had murdered McDonough, probably with a blow to McDonough's skull, since the coroner's examination had disclosed no bullet or knife wound. Frame got McDonough's rubber boots, a paint brush, a rope and the pail of warm blood—probably he was the one who had insisted upon catching that blood—and finally he loaded these items and McDonough's body into his rig along with his half of the beef carcass.

Driving to his ranch, Frame pulled up alongside the corral where the vicious bull was imprisoned. Frame lifted the body of McDonough over the fence into the corral. Next, Frame roped the bull around its horns with McDonough's rope and let the rope drop into the corral. He either held up the fresh beef in the bull's sight to let it catch the blood smell or else tossed a small amount of the blood in the pail into the corral. This was sufficient to excite and enrage the bull to the point of attacking the inert body of McDonough.

FRAME, stepping from his rig to the corral fence, placed near that fence on the ground the bucket of blood and the paint brush. Progressing along the fence, he reached the creek and there planted McDonough's rubber boots. After this Frame carried the fresh beef to the shed—as he had said he had done—and drove to town to bring out his new hired man.

Convinced that his theory was the

true explanation of the brutal murder mystery, Coyle exploded, "I won't let the killer get away with it! Yet how can I nail the deadwood on him?"

He was still cogitating on this problem two hours later when Sheriff Ordway returned to the Two In A Box.

"Say, you'd better kill that bull," the sheriff remarked as he dismounted.

Speculatively Coyle eyed the surly brute munching hay in its corral as if he didn't like the feed, as if he hated the whole world in fact.

The sheriff was going on in a disgruntled, moody tone: "Mrs. Jane McDonough wants the critter exterminated, pronto. She come running to me, after Frame had talked to her. Don't reckon he got near as warm a welcome as he figgered he'd get. Nope."

Charlie Coyle elevated one eyebrow. His hands were a bit shaky as he rolled a fresh smoke. "You know heaps more about the set up here'n I do," he commented. "This Nelse Frame wasn't coming between Mrs. McDonough and her husband?"

"Not as I know of, and if there was any such idea got around, Jane shore exploded that notion in her talk with me."

"Still and all, even if Frame and the woman don't get along, he could make it so unpleasant for her she'd have to sell out to him," Coyle remarked.

"Yes," growled the sheriff. "Between you and me this Nelse Frame's an ornery old buzzard . . . Jane McDonough give me a terrible bawlin' out. She said there was somethin' all haywire about this ghastly business and I should uncover it.

"She said Jim McDonough was the finest man on earth and he would never, never have thought of murdering his neighbor. I pointed out how the evidence was dead agin him and she flared, 'Why did Nelse Frame buy that bull, knowing it was a savage beast and a man killer, unless he had some wicked plot in mind?'

"Coyle, that was a hard un to answer. Of course I told her Frame hadn't known till after he'd paid for the bull it was a killer. She scoffed at the idea. So I rid out yere oncet again to see if there was somethin' we hadn't seen."

Charlie Coyle said: "I'm glad you told me how Mrs. McDonough's feeling. Sheriff, I've figured out what could have happened here last night. Seems stronger'n ever to me now it's what did happen. I'll tell you about it, then I'll tell you the scheme I've doped out to trap killer Frame."

Fifteen minutes later Sheriff Ordway slapped his leg, then shook Coyle's hand heartily. "I'll play the game through with you, cowboy. I'll be hid in the brush nigh that big Steeple Rock on the hogback north of these buildings tomorrow night and—we'll see what happens. . . Now you get Frame's rifle and shoot that bull."

HOWEVER the sheriff rode back to Red Mound without waiting to see that this order was carried out and Charlie Coyle did not molest the bull. What he did in the next few hours was to collect all of Nelse Frame's cartridges both for the rancher's six-shooter and his rifle. Coyle pulled the lead out of each shell, emptied out the powder and replaced the lead. He then put the cartridges back in exactly the same places where they had been.

Frame came home late that evening. Later still Charlie Coyle stole

soundlessly out of the bedroom allotted to him and placed under the bottom of the outer door of the ranch house a folded scrap of paper. Through the keyhole of his bedroom, Coyle was watching Nelse Frame when the rancher got up the following morning and immediately discovered this scrap of paper.

Unfolding it, Frame saw a crude drawing of a wide open human eye and the word: "Witness." Under this was printed:

> "Put ten thousand dollars, cash at the foot of Steeple Rock at ten to-night, or I'll spill the works. Come afoot and alone to the rock, leave the dough and go home. Don't try to follow me, or—"

The blood drained from Frame's heavy face. His eyes seemed to pop from their sockets. The paper fluttered in his shaking hands. Yet in a moment he mastered himself, stepped outside and bent to look for tracks; finding none, he shouted in an odd high voice:

"Coyle, get breakfast. I'll wrangle the horses."

But before he wrangled the horses the man took his rifle and six-shooter and circled around his ranch buildings, four times.

"Looking for tracks he won't find!" mused Coyle. "We've got his goat. He's guilty!"

Frame did not come to breakfast at all. Instead the man put in the box stall of his stable the best and fastest horse he owned. He saddled another, then told Coyle briefly, "Do whatever you see needs doing. I'm heading to town. Be back when you see me."

Charlie Coyle feared that the agitated man had no intention of returning. But was reassured by the fact that Frame had put the good horse in the barn. Why? To ride out of the country—if he thought it necessary.

The sheriff did not appear during the day nor in the evening, and by nine that night Charlie Coyle was on tenterhooks fearing Nelse Frame had decided to disappear without ever going near Steeple Rock. But at last the man dashed into the yard. The odor of whisky was strong on his breath, yet he wasn't drunk, merely keyed up, stimulated, reckless.

"Coyle," he said, unsaddling his sweaty mount in front of the house, "you better hit the hay. That's what I'm going to do, pronto."

Coyle said, "O.K." He yawned to his room, blew out the light and gazed out of the window, listening, watching, as tense as a coiled spring.

Frame, having turned loose his horse, carried his saddle and bridle to the stable, and from the sounds there, Coyle knew the man was saddling the horse in the box stall.

BUT Nelse Frame did not ride away from the stable. The horse saddled, he walked to the house, picked up a few minor articles which he stuffed in his pockets, took a look at his six-shooter to make sure it was loaded, then, glancing nervously at his watch, he went out and strode purposefully up the hogback back of his house.

Galvanizing to action, Charlie Coyle left the house. As silently as possible he led the saddled horse out of the box stall, tied it behind the barn. Then, taking Nelse Frame's bull rod he went to the bull's corral, snapped the rod into the ring in the animal's nose. He led the bull into the box stall, released the rod from its nose and closed the door.

Meanwhile, up on the hogback,

Frame had stopped twenty feet from Steeple Rock. Crouching in the underbrush, he called:

"I got the dough for you. But let's talk this over."

Receiving no answer, Frame blustered: "Well, if you don't want to talk, I'll just take the swag with me. What in blazes'd you see anyhow? Who are you?"

Sheriff Ordway, hiding nearby, now thought he might get the man to commit himself. So he replied, "Saw the whole—"

As the officer's voice accurately located his whereabouts to Frame, Frame's gun crashed. As rapidly as he could pull trigger he emptied the weapon. But the explosions were not the full deep throated roars of cartridges filled with powder, and Nelse Frame must have realized something was wrong. When an answering shot from the sheriff sent a bullet through Frame's hat, he ripped out an oath, bounded to his feet and sped like an antelope down the hogback.

Sheriff Ordway, plunging after the man, tripped over a root and fell sprawling. But Nelse Frame did not stop. Past his house and on to the stable he went. Flinging open the door to the box stall, he sprang inside, called, "Whoa, boy. Where are you?" and a moment later, hoarsely shrilled, "What the—"

The question ended in an unearthly yell followed by a smashing, thumping, ripping sound within the box stall. Then came the harsh and terrifying voice of a bull which has smelled blood—a sound unlike any other voiced by cattle, a blood-curdling, horrible bellowing roar.

Sheriff Ordway, running down the slope, heard that sound without knowing the reason for it. But as the officer reached the house, Charlie Coyle stepped out into his plain sight and Coyle said tersely, "Better keep away from the barn for a spell. Doors are open and that bull'll be coming out in the starlight, so you can put a bullet between his eyes."

"To heck with the bull," snapped Ordway. "Where's Nelse Frame? He sold this outfit to raise the jack—proving he's plumb guilty. But he's getting away! You got a couple of broncs handy, so we can light out after him?"

" 'Twon't be necessary," Coyle returned. "Frame ran afoul of his own killer bull."

"You—you mean—? Great Guns, Coyle, did you have somethin' to do with that?"

"Sort of poetic justice ain't it, sheriff?"

"Well, yes. But—Man, you're mighty cold blooded."

"Maybeso, sheriff. But I had my reasons. Got a letter two-three weeks ago from my only sister asking me to come visit her and her husband. She said she loved him so much it hurt, was happier'n she'd ever been in her life.

"I finally got around to drifting up this way. But I allowed I wouldn't sponge on Jane and her husband. I knew Frame's ranch was next to McDonough's and when Frame offered me a job I said to myself I'll be next door to Jane and Jim and can see 'em often. I never dreamed Jane was in Red Mound that night until after I got out here to the Two In A Box and found—found her husband murdered.

"Sheriff, I'd have shot Nelse Frame myself, only—"

"Only," ejaculated the sheriff of Red Mound, "it seemed more fittin' to you that the bull'd do the job. Since you've told me Jane McDonough's your sister, I agree!"

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NO GREATER GUN-GLORY

by LEE FLOREN

His name was Sundown, and his name was feared. . . . . But the Colt-magic he worked on that flaming night brought to his name another tag—Respect!

ONCE AGAIN he would soon face roaring guns, but this time he would probably die. And he did not fear death, his fear was that he might not live to carry out his plans. For the first time in twenty-five years he wanted to do something honest. . . .now the guns

of his fellow outlaws opposed him.

Gray-haired, grizzled, he squatted on his run-over bootheels and studied Bill LaRue, the outlaw leader, who squatted opposite him across the small campfire there in that desolate Arizona canyon.

LaRue repeated his question. "Just what did you find out at their cabin, Sundown?" and his voice was very low.

Sundown replied patiently, "I've already told you that a young fellow and his wife live there. But he's club-footed, and I'm not robbin' a cripple!"

"You're holdin' somethin' back," LaRue accused.

Sundown Cross' eyes were inscrutable, hiding the tug and pull of his thoughts. LaRue was right, he wasn't telling all. That afternoon, near the crippled fellow's cabin on Last Chance Gulch, he had seen a young man and his young wife panning gold in the clear water. Hidden in the brush, he had heard them talk gaily as they worked, and something within him—something he had once thought long dead—had risen again to life. And that something, coming from the part of his life he had tried to forget, made him lie to his fellow outlaws now.

Now LaRue, tall and stony hard, glanced at Shorty Johnson, his squat *segundo*, who sat crosslegged beside him. Johnson's thin lips were coldly cynical.

"What about the gold?" he snapped. "They got any?"

LaRue said sternly, "Shut up, Johnson!"

Johnson studied LaRue. "O. K.," he said at length.

LaRue glanced at Hawk Byton who leaned against a sandstone rock, ten feet away. Byton's hawk-nosed face was hard. LaRue's beady eyes jerked back to Sundown.

"Cough up, Sundown!"

"Look at it this way," Sundown said slowly. "We're headin' into Maricopa tonight, goin' to knock over the bank there. If we rob these young-uns first, we'll be late gettin' into Maricopa. An' when we head outa Maricopa the law'll be houndin' our back-trail plenty close. We won't have time to rob 'em then. An' I say forget it!"

LaRue said harshly, "I'm boss here, Sundown, an' don't forget it! I asked you a question—I want an answer! *Have they got any gold?*"

Sundown's eyes bored into LaRue's. "You hate my guts, don't you?" he said slowly.

LaRue's black eyes became hard as polished onyx. "T'hell with that! You watched them all afternoon, but you don't know nothin'! What if the young pistol is crippled? You gone soft? What are you holdin' back?"

Sundown made his voice level. "Jus' what'd you mean?"

Byton snorted. "There's a rat in the woodpile, LaRue!"

"I say the same!" Johnson declared.

"Kick through!" LaRue growled. "Tell all of it, or we'll kill you, here an' now! No double crosser's travelin' with my gang!"

"They ain't got no gold!"

There was a short silence. Last Chance Gulch, where the cripple lived, had once been the scene of a gold rush. The rush was over now, of course, but the cripple was working the tailings, and he had gold. He had lied; and they knew it.

LaRue purred, "You've rode with me for five years, Sundown, but you never stepped outa line before. You're shieldin' that cripple, an' I can't figure why. You're a liar!"

"No man's callin' me a liar, LaRue!"

The outlaw leader spoke bluntly. "I'm callin' you that."

Sundown smiled bleakly. His muscles tense, his eyes missing nothing, he got slowly to his feet, his hands resting on the worn, cedar butts of his holstered .45s, his lips a narrow line in his bloodless, weather-seamed face. "You shouldn't have said that, LaRue!"

"I'm repeatin' it—you're a liar!"

Sundown saw Johnson's stubby fingers were settled tightly around his gungrips. Byton's hands rested on holstered guns and Byton, he knew, was the fastest. This lanky son of the guntrail was as swift as flame. He would kill Byton, first.

"You're not robbin' that cripple," he said, huskily.

LaRue did not get to his feet. Suddenly, he said, "He asked for it, men!" and started his draw.

Already, Byton's guns were leaping from leather. But, before Byton fired, Sundown's Colts coughed hotly. The heavy butts kicked back hard against his palms. The two slugs tore through Byton's chest, making Byton's lead rip harmlessly into the ground. Byton's knees folded, he fell on his face, dead.

Gun-hammers eared back, Sundown pivoted swiftly to face LaRue, but already the outlaw-leader's .45s spat flame. The lead whammed into Sundown's ribs. He tried to hold his footing, but he went down flat on his belly.

Lying prone, he fired at Johnson, breaking the squat man's shoulder, bowling him over and sending his lead singing wildly into the night.

LaRue shot again then. One slug missed, but the other smashed into his shoulder. Desperately, he tried to turn his guns on LaRue, but his strength left him suddenly, and his guns tumbled from his fingers.

LaRue stepped forward, booted his guns aside. "I'm killing you, Sundown," he said tersely.

Sundown studied the black bores of the six-shooters. "That's about your style," he said. "You're the sort to kill a man when he's defenseless!"

LaRue frowned. "Pick up your guns," he ordered.

Sundown broke into a coughing spasm. Johnson, who had gotten to his feet, came over and looked down at him. "Why kill the double-crossin' son?" the squat outlaw asked huskily.

"What'd you mean?"

"You kill 'im, an' he'll be outa his misery," Johnson explained. An evil fire flared in his narrowed eyes. "Hell, let 'im suffer before he kicks the bucket, Bill!"

Bill LaRue's eyes were mere pinpoints now. "I get the drift," he said slowly. "Take his guns an' his bronc an' leave him a-foot, that it?"

Johnson nodded. "That's it."

LaRue holstered his guns. "Suits me," he said drily. "I never did cotton to him, nohow."

Sundown spat blood. "You're two dirty dogs," he said.

LaRue laughed meanly. "You'll be on foot, unarmed, an' the nearest house is your crippled friend's, ten miles away. We'll give you that chance, Sundown, an' hope you don't make it."

"I'll kill you for this," Sundown said.

"We'll see," LaRue grunted.

LaRue unbuckled Sundown's gunbelts, picked up his Colts. Then, he took Byton's guns and belts. He tore Byton's shirt to strips and bound Johnson's shoulder. "We'll rob the Maricopa bank, an' then collect the

golddust off'n these young uns on our way back." They rode away then, leading the horses belonging to Sundown and Byton.

Sundown closed his eyes, and lay there. There was blood on his shirt; he felt its warmth against him. Finally, his nausea passed. He braced his hands under him, and pushed, and got into a sitting position, back to a boulder.

Now the fire was a small bed of live coals. There was some light from it, and in this he inspected his wounds. Three ribs were broken. Pain filled his lungs when he breathed. But the bullet had been deflected and had torn through his flesh on its way out; the other had only nicked the top of his shoulder-blade.

Knees unsteady, he got to his feet, and knelt beside Byton. He tore the leg off of Byton's pants, ripped it into strips, and bound his ribs tightly. He had lost quite a bit of blood, but his strength was returning.

WALKING slowly, he headed for the cripple's cabin. He stumbled over rocks, slid in loose shale. His side was numb, heavy. Each breath was painful. Sweat covered his forehead, clung clammily to his body.

He had feared that walking might loosen his bandage, but it did not. He walked faster. Finally, the moon rose and showed the gullies and hog-back ridges clearly, throwing in relief the buckbrush and thick manzanita bushes. It did something else, too. It brought him memories of this same moon shining on these same hills, almost a quarter-century before....

Once, he halted. He leaned wearily against a sandstone rock. He said slowly, "I shouldn't think of that..," for the long-dead memories were rising to life again. He started walking but he was thinking of it, just the same.

Now he followed an old trail—a winding, twisting trail. He knew it led to the cabin—now six miles away. And, still, he kept thinking of her. But she was dead...she'd been dead almost twenty-five years.

He muttered suddenly, "That damned LaRue! He thought he was leavin' me in strange range. He doesn't know I used to homestead here!"

LaRue didn't know about *her*, either. Nobody knew about her, except himself. How he'd loved her, married her—about their son. That they had lived in these hills and run cattle here....

That day, he had said: "They've stolen almos' half our purebred stock. Now, they tell me Watson's down in Maricopa, challengin' me to ride into town an' gun it out with him. He's openly boastin' he's been stealin' our cattle an' sellin' them acrost the river. Me an' you has worked for four long years—worked our hands to the bone—tryin' to build up this outfit! I have to ride in, an' meet him, Honey!"

She had said, "But you don't have to!"

"You don't understand...."

"But I do! I know what we're up against. Watson an' his gunmen have been stealin' your cattle on purpose. He wants you to move out so his herds can have the water we're usin' for irrigation, water he used to claim before we settled here. But please don't kill just to hold land! To protect cattle! No land, no cattle, are worth killing a man about! Sell out to Watson, and we'll leave the country!" She had been pleading, then.

He had said, stubbornly, "No!"

She had studied him, her dark eyes hiding her pain. "When you look like that, you look like a fierce wolf —a human wolf! We've gone over this before: I can never hold you back." Her voice softened and tears were close then, but she held them back.

"I'll come back to you!" he promised grimly.

He had kissed her then, and told her to take good care of little Jim, who had already been put to bed. Then, he mounted and turned his gray toward Maricopa. Once, he drew rein on a high ridge and looked back, and she was still standing before the cabin, her slender form barely discernible in the evening shadows that were rapidly claiming the rangelands.

But Watson did not await him in Maricopa.

Puzzled, he had turned his horse again toward home and then, on the skyline ahead, he saw the fire burning fiercely. But, by the time he got there, their cabin had burned completely, the barn was a mass of glowing embers, and his haystacks were heaps of burned-out ashes.

Cold-lipped, he had ridden back to Maricopa. "Watson an' his gang burned my spread," he told the sheriff. "My wife, an' my kid, died out there, tonight."

The pot-bellied lawman frowned. "You shoulda never moved in on Watson's territory."

"That's beside the point. What're you goin' to do?"

"Well, now, I'll ride out there, an' look it over. But maybe it wasn't Watson, maybe it was accidental, maybe—"

"There were horse-tracks aroun' there!"

The sheriff squinted. "You got horses aroun,' ain't you? Maybe it was some of their tracks."

He had hit, then. An overhand, mauling blow, it had smashed into the lawman's weak jaw, lifted him from the floor and knocked him across the room, and dumped him in a corner, knocked unconscious. Then, he rode to the Watson Circle Y spread.

But there was only one person there, a slim, grizzled oldster. He knew him as Ben Contrough, a cattleman who owned half the county of Cocinero, and Ben Contrough had no reason for being on the Circle Y. But he soon found different.

"Where's Watson?"

"Watson pulled out."

He studied Contrough. "Where'd he go?"

"I dunno. I jus' gave him an' his riders their checks, an' they drifted this evenin'."

"I thought Watson owned this spread?"

"He never did," Contrough said evenly. "I've owned it, all this time. Watson was jus' workin' for me."

He said, "Do you pack a gun, Contrough?"

"I do."

"Then, pull it!"

Contrough squinted, "Who are you, Stranger?"

He kept his tone level. "It ain't hard to see through your lousy game, Mister. You've owned this spread all the time, an' have had Watson here buildin' it up, raisin' hell with us small cowmen. Now, Watson's run us all out—an' you've paid him off. You aim to come in now, run this outfit up big, an' milk the country dry an' boss it as you see fit. But Watson had one more job to pull, an' he pulled it as he left the country. But you're the cause of it all, Contrough, so jerk your cutter."

Contrough said, "By hell, you asked—"

The rest was lost in the roar of the guns. Contrough's bullet, fired first, fired wildly, tore through the fork of his saddle. Then his own gun, blending with that of the cowman's, spoke —and Contrough's knees buckled as he died.

He had left them, trailing Watson and his gang. The outfit split up in Deming, and scattered—it took six years to hunt them down and separately kill them; but the last finally paid.

He stumbled suddenly, and fell.

HE SAT there, staring stupidly about him, then he got to his feet and started forward again, his knees stronger now. He had two miles to go, he figured; soon, when he attained that ridge ahead, he could look down into the gulch where the cripple and his wife lived.

LaRue and Johnson wouldn't arrive at the cabin until dawn, he knew. It was quite a ways to Maricopa—it would take quite a bit of time to go there and return. He frowned. What if a Maricopa posse cut their trail and hounded them so closely they wouldn't have time to rob the young couple? That would be all right. Or what if a posse drove them north and blocked them from reaching the gold?

But he knew LaRue. LaRue wanted that gold badly. He aimed to leave the States and head into newer and less lawful ranges, the Argentine pampas of South America—and he'd get their gold, regardless.

He took mental stock of his standings: he was wounded, but not badly—he needed guns to carry out this dream that he pursued, and the cripple had them. So he had to visit the cabin. He was thinking of this when he reached the ridge and looked down at the scene below.

The house lay in the shadow of the cliff, dark and small against the overthrust of the hill. Below it, some fifty yards, were a small barn, two good-sized haystacks, and an outbuilding. He went down the slope and came out of the buckbrush opposite the barn.

He halted in the doorway, his eyes trying to pierce the inky-dark interior. The strong odor of manure came to him, and he heard horses heavily munching hay. Gradually, his eyes became accustomed to the dark and he saw two horses standing in the stalls.

His plan was complete: he would saddle a horse and have it ready for the trail and then, somehow, without awakening the pair in the house, he would get hold of a rifle or sixgun, then he would ride down the canyon and wait there for LaRue and Johnson to come from Maricopa. He saw a saddle hanging from a peg. Suddenly, a fierce hope arose within him. Maybe the saddle had a rifle-scabbard, and maybe the youth had left his Winchester there instead of taking it into the house.

It was too dark for clear vision, so he felt of the saddle and located the scabbard, and hope flared but it died instantly—the scabbard held no rifle. He took the saddle and went to the closest horse. The beast smelled blood on him and snorted, but he rubbed its velvety nose and talked softly. He lowered the saddle on the broad back.

He had slipped the tackaberry buckle over the cinch ring and was getting ready to pull tight the latigo strap when a harsh voice behind him said, "Put up your hands, an' don't try anythin' funny!"

He turned. A man stood three feet

away, his rifle pointing at him. He recognized the club-footed fellow.

"I ain't got a gun, fella," he said softly.

The club-footed fellow said, "*Put up your hands!*"

He raised his hands. "I figured you'd be in bed."

The fellow snorted. "We saw you today just as you rode back over the ridge. You thought you were doin' somethin' smart by spyin' on us, huh? You figured you'd spy to make sure how much dust we had, then you'd ride back an' bring your gang!"

"My gang? What're you talkin' about?"

"We know Bill LaRue an' his cutthroats are in this country! You're one of them, an' you wanta get our gold!" The man frowned suddenly. "But why are you here alone? An' why were you goin' to steal my bronc? You got a horse of your own, ain't you?"

"No." He smiled. "An' this is a kinda funny way to go about robbin' you, ain't it?"

"We'll talk it over in the house!" He gestured with his rifle. "Keep your hands up, an' head out the door! I'm behin' you, mister, an' this gun has a hair-trigger!" They went outside, and the youth called, "Jennie!"

"Here," a woman answered.

"I got one of them! You see any more?"

"No. Be careful, Jack." She came up to them then, a small, trim figure in the darkness, and Sundown saw she, too, carried a rifle. "You taking him in the house?"

"Yes."

"I'll stand guard, Jack."

He said, "No use of that; I don't want you out here alone. Come into the house with us, an' if they come—we'll fight them from there!"

"We should have taken the gold to Maricopa," she said ruefully.

"Buck up," he encouraged.

"We should have done it yesterday, like we planned."

THEY WENT to the house. Sundown walked ahead, the rifle in his back, and they followed. Inside, the girl bolted the door and lighted a kerosene lamp, keeping the wick turned low. The yellow light, dim, flickering, showed rough, homemade furniture; but the room was neat, orderly, with rag-rugs and a bearskin covering the scrubbed, softwood floor. The lamplight showed, for the first time, the dark, dried blood on Sundown's shirt.

"Oh, heavens!" the girl cried.

Her husband stood on Sundown's left, he hadn't seen the blood yet. "What's wrong?"

The girl's smooth, oval face, framed by her dark, tightly combed hair, showed her surprise clearly. "He's wounded!"

Her husband stared. "What happened?" he demanded.

"My bronc fell an' threw me an' busted my ribs on a rock. I lost my guns, too, an' I couldn't fin' 'em, it was so dark. My cayuse run off an' left me afoot."

"What'd you do with your gunbelt?" the youth asked cynically. "You never lost it; your story don't hold water."

"I threw it away, that much less weight to carry."

The youth laughed softly. "Do you expect us to believe that lie? Don't forget we saw you yesterday! I know every cowboy that rides for every local rancher, an' you don't hol' down a ridin' job on this range, mister. You're a danged outlaw!"

The wife cut in. "Outlaw or not, he needs medical attention!"

"What'd you mean, Jennie?"

"One of us has to ride to Maricopa, and bring out Doc Mattison. We can't let him die like a dirty dog, even though we think he is an outlaw!"

"Let him die," the youth said bitterly. "He'd a killed us, jus' for a little gold. We don't need any sympathy for him, now!"

"Jack!" the girl reproached.

"Sit down," Jack ordered.

Sundown took a chair at the table. Jennie said no more. She dipped water with a battered dipper from a pail, and put it in a pan. She broke twigs from the woodbox, and started a fire in the stove, and put the water on to heat. Jack stood beside the window and looked out through a corner of the drawn blind and watched the Maricopa trail. He held his rifle. He also kept an eye on Sundown.

"What're you doin,' Jennie?" he asked.

"I'm going to wash his wound, and dress it."

"Why waste time on a human wolf?"

She did not answer; she kept on working. Sundown sat there, tense, taut, wondering just how he was going to get out of this—he had to find a way! But so far, he had not found it. He needed Jack's rifle!

"It'll be daylight in an hour," Jack said.

Jennie looked at him. "Let's take our gold and leave the house and hide in the hills!"

He frowned. "We could do that." Then, he shook his head. "We couldn't get away from them. They'd trail us. They want our gold, an' they'll get it—or die for it!"

"We could hide in the hills."

"Yes, but they'd capture us, sure

(Continued On Page 98)

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Western Action

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as Hades. That gold is purty heavy, too, an' would be hard to pack. If we buried it, an' they caught us, they'd torture us until we tol' them where it was. No, we'll fight it out here!"

She said, slowly: "You're right, Jack. We built this house; we developed this land. An' we'll fight for it!"

"Until they kill us!"

She set a pan of hot water on the table. "Can you unbutton your shirt?"

"Yes, but you don't need to do this."

"I know; but I'm doing it anyway!"

But his fingers were clumsy, so she unbuttoned his shirt. Then, she unwrapped the dirty bandage made from Byton's pants, her smooth forehead showing a deep frown. "He's been shot," she said hollowly.

HER HUSBAND moved over and looked at the raw wound. "You're right, Jennie." He picked up the blood-stiffened bandage. "This is from a pair of pants. What happened?"

Sundown leaned back and closed his eyes. He took the facts into his brain and rolled them over and over; and, still, the answer was always the same. He was doing what any ordinary man would do, were he faced with a similar problem. For you may be low in the social scale—you may be an outlaw—but there is something within you that you must feed and satisfy. For if you don't, then you're just a killer—and you're no good, then, to anybody, not even yourself. And then, too, he had this dream inside of him, and it had been with him, these many years.

And, to carry out this dream, he needed a gun—and this youth's rifle

would do. But how would he get it? He'd have to soon figure out some plan, for any time now LaRue and Johnson would come—unless both had been killed in Maricopa—and then it would be too late!

He said, wearily, "We had a gunfight, an' I killed him."

"Gunfight, huh? An' who'd you kill? An' why?"

"I killed Hank Byton. Him an' LaRue an' Johnson wanted to rob your gold!"

The youth went pale. "See there, Jennie! The LaRue gang is in the country, an' they aim to rob us, an' they had a fight an' this outlaw gets wounded—" He peered at Sundown. "There's somethin' crazy here! You say you fought 'em to keep 'em from robbin' us? An' why? So you could rob us alone, huh? Then you'd have our gold all to yourself, an' you wouldn't have to divide your booty with the others!"

"That isn't it," Sundown said softly.

The youth stared. "Then what is?"

Jennie said, "Jack, don't be so impetuous!" She was tearing a sheet into strips now for bandages, and the pan of water was dyed a dull, reddish color from the blood on Sundown's ribs. "Let him finish."

"Thanks, girl," Sundown said.

Jack sat down, across the table from Sundown. "Go ahead."

Sundown told them all: how he'd killed Byton, how they'd left him to die, how they aimed to rob the bank and then get their gold on the way back. There was no use holding anything now; he needed that rifle. And if they believed him and gave it to him, he'd ride down that canyon and meet LaRue and Johnson, and kill them.

The youth stared. "I don't believe you," he said, emphatically.

(Continued On Page 100)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 99)

Jennie finished the bandaging. "How do you feel?"

He said, "Better now, thanks." The heaviness had left, and the pain had settled to a dull, monotonous ache. Jennie looked at her husband and said, "I do, Jack."

"An' why?"

"If he didn't mean it, why did he come here to us?"

He snorted. "Don't let that wild story take you in, Jennie. He sneaked in here, didn't he? If he was honest, an' meant to do what he says, why didn't he come in openly, like an honest man? No, he coyotes in, an' tries to steal a horse—"

Sundown interrupted. "You lendin' me a horse an' a rifle?"

"No!"

SUNDOWN glanced at the window. Already the dim, gray light of early dawn was creeping under the blind. They'd have robbed the bank by now, and he could picture them riding up the canyon—LaRue, big, staunch, in the lead; squat Johnson following—heading for this cabin, and this gold.

He looked again at Jack, noticing again that the rifle leaned against his chair, close at hand; that he sat very close to the table—and he saw his way to get the rifle, then. He glanced at Jennie. She stood to his right, watching them—and keeping an eye out of the window.

He acted then. He braced his legs against the table, feeling the roughness against his knees, then he kicked hard, and the table upset suddenly, knocking Jack's chair back. The cripple sprawled on the floor, and Jennie screamed.

The unexpectedness of the attack had caught Jack off-guard, and his crippled state made his movements slow. And, despite the pain in his

side, Sundown hurriedly cleared the overturned table. Jack was scrambling for his rifle, which had fallen some distance away, and he kicked it from him and then he had the rifle, covering them.

There was a small silence. Jack got slowly to his feet, and Jennie hurried to him, her face pale. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Jack regarded the rifle fearlessly. "You damned outlaw!"

"Tie him up, Jennie!"

"I won't!"

Sundown had no intentions of shooting, he wanted only to scare her into obedience. He cocked the rifle. "Tie him up!"

Jack cried, "Do it! He might shoot!"

She had part of the sheet left, and she tied her husband's hands behind him with that. Then Sundown said, "Come here, girl!" and she went to him, her proud head set defiantly. "What do you want now, Killer?"

That hurt. "Turn around," he ordered.

She did; he tied her hands behind her. "I hate to do this," he told her. "But I have to, you don't trust me. I won't tie you too tight. You can get loose after a while, if you keep workin' with your fingers."

"What are you going to do?" she asked steadily.

"You know what I aim to do!"

Her eyes were dark, fearless pools. "Then you spoke truly—you don't want our gold?"

"Does it look like it?"

"No. . . ."

He repeated, "I'm sorry I had to do this," and then went out the door, rifle in hand. He bolted the door behind him. The sun was rising now, lighting the scraggly hills, but he had no eye for it as he hurried to

(Continued On Page 102)

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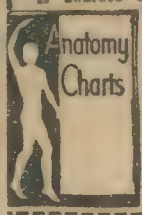

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(Continued From Page 101)

the barn, mounted the saddled horse, and loped down the canyon.

The horse was fresh, and pulled at the bit. He sent it up an incline, and there on the top of a high hill he drew rein and looked toward Maricopa.

A lone rider was coming up the canyon toward him. He was about three miles away. Despite the distance, he recognized LaRue. But where was Johnson? He lifted his gaze and he saw riders—a large group of them—miles away on the other side of the basin, riding away from him. He understood. Johnson and LaRue had run into trouble; Johnson had either been killed or captured. And LaRue, by clever work, had led the posse north and lost it in the hills; now he was doubling back to rob the young couple, and had left the lawmen following a cold trail. That was good....the odds were even now that Johnson was gone.

He rode back into the canyon, tied his bronc in a motte of willows, then went to the trail and crouched in the brush, his rifle ready. This was coming to a head now; it would soon be over.

HE CHECKED the rifle's loads, seeing that the barrel held an unfired cartridge, that the magazine was loaded; then he heard hoofs coming and he stepped into the trail, his rifle upped slightly. LaRue saw him and the outlaw reined in his lathered horse and stared at him.

"By Hades," he said hoarsely, "you did pull through, didn't you?"

Sundown asked, "Where's Johnson?"

LaRue spat. "Dead! The posse got him back yonder! Now I'm gettin' that dust off'n those kids an'

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hittin' across the border into Mexico!"

"You won't get their dust," Sundown said, softly.

LaRue's heavy eyes narrowed. "You still harpin' about that?" he demanded angrily. "Lissen, Sundown, I've stood enough. We never got a cent outa that bank! They musta been on the lookout for us, the joint was guarded—I was danged lucky to get out alive! Now you stan' here an'—!"

"You're not gettin' their gold, I tell you!"

LaRue stiffened. No man spoke for some time, and the only sounds were that of LaRue's hard-breathing horse and the wind sighing through the scrub pine. Suddenly, anger broke in LaRue, and he drew his .45s.

LaRue shot once—and missed—as Sundown's bullets started. Sundown shot five times. Each bullet found its mark. LaRue slid over his saddle-fork and hit the ground, dead.

He unbuckled LaRue's belts, and took his .45s. He went to his borrowed horse, stuck the rifle in the saddleboot, tied the reins around the horn, then slapped the horse on the rump. The beast loped up-canyon toward home.

He mounted LaRue's bronc and, leaving the dead man there, he rode up the ridge and looked down at the cabin. He saw the horse trot into the yard, saw Jack and Jennie come from the house and get it by the reins.

He waited no longer. The couple had freed themselves—they and their gold were safe. He turned his bronc south toward the border.... and Mexico.

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THE WINGED HOSS

By John Scott Douglas

The spirited saga of a spirited old hoss and an old rancher who felt the same way —pulling a deal Custer would have been proud of. . . .

"POP" HAWLEY, waiting in a buggy outside the Climax Hotel for business which never came, stirred to life like a bantam rooster that has been prodded too long as the author of all his troubles crossed the dusty main street of Sage Flats.

"Porky" Parr, the banker, smiled blandly. "I found an hombre what will buy your hoss."

The peppery little man glared suspiciously from beneath bushy white brows. "Pegasus ain't for sale."

"He's a trapper," Parr went on. "That bag of bones you're drivin' would make a right nice rack he could dry his hides on."

Pop Hawley sprang out of the buggy with considerable agility for a man on the late side of sixty, and shook a wizened finger under the fat banker's nose.

"Parr," he shrilled, "some day ye'll go too danged far!"

"Only aimin' to do a good turn for a friend."

"You and yore good turns!" yelled the old man. "You talked me into mortgagin my ranch to buy fifty haid o' long-horns jest when you knowed aforehand stock prices was goin' down. Then you won't make no extension, and me, a respectable rancher, is hoomiliatin' myself driving a hack at two-fifty a turn to save my ranch. Why, you pig-eyed, unenlightened buzzard, I got half a mind—"

"Remember your blood pressure, Pop! Better consider that trapper's offer. Might

do worse than get a coupla bucks for that scarecrow you're drivin'."

"Scarecrow!" Pop Hawley was beside himself with rage. "I'll have ye understand Pegasus means winged hoss. It's Greek or Roosian or Mexican or something. That name was given him by one of Custer's best cavalrymen."

"With hosses like him, no wonder Custer got beat."

The old man felt his temperature rising. The venerable horse had been bought in better days and had been a proud animal then. Already retired from service, he had made no protest when, with tears in his eyes, old Pop Hawley had said, "I shore hate to do this, Pegasus, but we got to save the ranch for Slim if we can."

"Old as he is," Pop Hawley shrilled, "he could run away from that spraddle-laigged, buzzard-bait you got yore surrey hitched to."

"That right?" Parr's small, beady eyes glittered. "If I didn't know you was jest spoutin' hot air, I'd take ye up on that, old man."

In cooler moments, caution would have whispered to Pop Hawley that the banker was laying another trap for him. But he was so close to trigger-temper that he was in no mood to listen to reason.

"My Pegasus can show his heels to that dray-hoss you drive any day in the week."

"f you ain't jest makin' windy talk," said the banker suavely, "we might run my hoss Bolivar against that scare-crow o' yours that by rights should be took to a glue factory."

"I'd lay every cent—" and then the old man's voice died as he remembered that he had only a single fifty-cent piece to his name.

"Don't let money worry ye," said the banker smoothly. "Just to make it a sportin' proposition, we'll lay a small wager. Yore ranch agin a cancelled mortgage. Free and clear if you win, but mine if Bolivar wins."

The sheriff, a lean, dour-looking man with a drooping sandy mustache sauntered up, attracted by the old man's outraged voice. He listened to the terms of the bet in silence.

"Pop," he said slowly, "ye better talk this over with Slim, or wait until ye cool down some."

"You mind yore own bizness!" snapped Pop Hawley. "I'm going to get my ranch

(Continued On Page 106)

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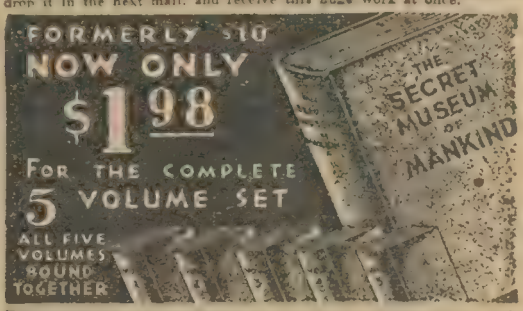

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(Continued From Page 105)

back, free and clear. I want you should hold the stakes, Sheriff."

THE THREE of them went into the bank. The necessary papers were drawn up to free Pop Hawley of the mortgage if his horse won, or to assign the ranch to "Porky" Parr if Pegasus lost.

By the time the old man returned to his buggy, he was feeling very low in his mind. The old horse stood with drooping head, a skeleton of an animal, not from lack of fodder but from old age. Pop Hawley's eyes stung as he stared at the old animal, and it slowly penetrated his consciousness that Parr had planned the whole thing to gain earlier possession of the Hawley ranch.

Slim Hawley swung out of the Horseshoe Merchantile Store, his lean, bronzed face anxious. He was an angular buckaroo in chaps and buckskin jacket, two heads higher than the old man who stood staring mournfully at the once-proud cavalry horse, and his wide, humorous mouth could slant into an easy grin, but there was no humor in his face now.

"Pop," he snapped, "Sheriff Tanner's tellin' it around that you made a loco bet with Parr."

"Now don't ye go jumpin' to no conclusions, Slim!"

"Did you or didn't you?"

The old man stared at the dust. "Well. . ."

Slim stood with arms akimbo, his mouth tightening. "Yo're a danged old idjit," he said, with a curious note of affection in his voice. "Whatever durned fool thing ye done, we stick together, Pop."

All the pepper went out of the little man, and he felt like crying. If Slim had bawled him out, he could have fought back like a wild colt on the end of a riata, but when his boy stood beside him in what he now realized was a bet that the rawest tenderfoot would not have made, it took all the starch out of the elder Hawley.

"Maybe Pegasus won't lose," he said hopefully.

Slim snorted. "Ain't he seven year older'n Bolivar? Pop, you let that polecat skin ye agin. We're goin' to see ye don't repeat."

"Where you goin'?" Pop Hawley cried in alarm, for his grim-faced son was heading toward the bank.

Sheriff Sam Tanner strode purposefully across the dusty street, for it was his policy to stop a ruckus before it started. Pop Hawley followed Slim, for he had learned from

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experience that when Slim was hot under the collar, he was likely to appear calmer than usual—as he did now.

Parr's beady eyes popped out of their rolls of flesh with fright, and his small mouth quivered as he licked his lips nervously. His courage ebbed back a little as he saw the sheriff enter behind Slim.

Slim walked to the counter, his blue eyes chilly as he stared at the fat banker. The sheriff moved to the counter a few feet away, shifting his chewing tobacco to one cheek so that he wouldn't swallow his cud if there was a necessity for fast action.

"Now if you think ye can talk me out o' that bet—" Parr blustered.

"I ain't aimin' to," Slim drawled. "We Hawleys stand by our word."

Parr expelled his breath. "I was figurin' to do yore paw a favor."

"I know what kind o' favor you was aimin' to do him," Slim said icily. "But that ain't why I come here. I want you should make out a power o' attorney paper so if my old man gets in any future transactions with a certain white-livered polecat—"

"I resent that, Hawley!"

Slim's fingers twitched on the counter. "Ain't aimin' to make nothin' o' my words, are ye, Parr?"

"No, no," said the banker hastily. He mopped his brow.

"Didn't think ye would. Now give me that paper."

The banker drew up the necessary papers, and Pop Hawley, feeling he deserved the bad medicine, signed with a shaking hand. Then, overwhelmed by his new humiliation, he could not resist the impulse to seize the banker's bulgy nose and give it a terrific tug.

A glint of amusement lighted Sheriff Tanner's dour eyes, and he discreetly steered a brown stream at the cuspidor when he saw what was about to happen.

Parr yelled in rage. "Arrest that man, Sheriff. He deliberately—"

"Cain't expect a man to see everything," said Tanner, suppressing a smile. "I was tryin' out yore new cuspidor, Mr. Parr."

WHEN Pop Hawley emerged from the bank, a big, straight-shouldered man in a major's uniform was standing beside the hack, staring around impatiently. He held the bridle of a horse which was

(Continued On Page 108)

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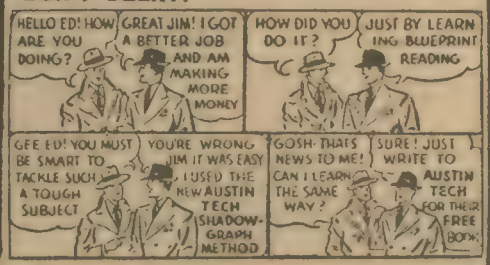

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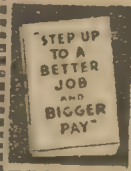

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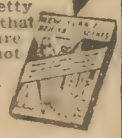

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(Continued From Page 107)

standing on three legs, with one front leg lifted slightly off the ground.

"You own this carriage?" the man asked briskly.

"Yes, Mister."

"I'm Major Seth Saylor of the Post. My horse has gone lame, and I have to catch the stagecoach at Five Forks in just—" The officer removed a large watch from his pocket. "—in just thirty-five minutes."

"Ain't right sure I can make it."

Slim said, "You want I should put yore hoss in the stable, Major?"

"Yes. Thanks." He sprang into the buggy. "Please hurry! This is terribly important."

"Shore do my best."

Pop Hawley snapped his whip, and Pegasus stirred out of his lethargy to gallop a few steps before resuming his usual slow walk. The old man urged and snapped the whip, but the old horse had learned from experience that the whip would never actually flick him.

From his seat, Pop Hawley could hear the officer shifting about impatiently behind him. He muttered and growled. Finally he could stand it no longer.

"Great guns, man! I'm going to miss my stagecoach! I could go faster than this walking!"

"Not pulling no buggy, you couldn't!"

The major snorted, and relapsed into silence, while the old horse walked placidly along, head down in spiritless toil.

"Jumping Jupiter!" the officer raged. "Can't you do anything to wake up that old nag?"

"He cain't help hisself, Major. He's jest a old cavalry hoss, and he's plumb wore out."

"Did you say *cavalry?*" There was a sudde hopeful lift to the officer's voice.

"Yes, Major. Jest a old cavalry hoss."

"Got a tight grip on your reins?"

"Reckon so. Why—?"

But there was no time to ask the question, for the major's voice thundered in the tone of command: *"Charge!"*

Pegasus' head was drooping as though he was dreaming of more glorious days one moment, and the next moment that head came up with a jerk and fifteen years were shed from the old shoulders. He quivered all over, snorted like a yearling, and then lit out as if all the devils in hell were in pursuit.

Pop Hawley was almost thrown from his

seat by the sudden spurt, and he had all he could do to grip the reins as the transformed horse sent clouds of dust swirling under the swift impact of those gallant old hooves. The carriage teetered and rocked, springs creaked from the strain, the boards wrenched with the sharp twist of the road, and in the back seat, the major was cheering on the old cavalry horse with wild war whoops.

In less than half the usual time, the hack reached Five Forks. Pop Hawley pulled on the reins, but Pegasus had the bit in his mouth and nothing would stop him. Men scattered and horses at hitching-posts bucked as the buggy careened down the street faced by the bold, board-fronted stores and saloons. Panic began to stir in the old man. How was he going to stop this rejuvenated animal?

Major Saylor solved that problem. As they approached a stage-coach about to depart, he roared, *"Halt!"*

Pegasus planted his hooves as though he had sighted a sidewinder, and the buggy, despite the old man's quick application of the brake, almost bowled the ex-cavalry horse from his feet. Shaking, the old war horse pawed the earth and there was a wild light in his eyes when the old man sprang down to pat the damp coat.

"How much do I owe you?" the major cried.

"Nothing." Pop Hawley grinned broadly. "You done *me* a favor. I'm going to get my ranch back."

The officer put a five-dollar bill into the old man's hand, and then leapt into the stagecoach.

THE race the next day was a foregone conclusion, although only Pop Hawley knew that. To the town of Sage Flats it was another step in the humiliation of an old man they all loved. The boys turned out not to see that humiliation, but because they hoped that by some miracle Bolivar might drop dead or fail to respond at the crucial moment.

To the boys of Sage Flats, the only hope of victory for old Pop Hawley lay in the conditions of the race which were that the horses must be mounted by their owners. Pop Hawley could fork a cayuse with the best of them; but Banker Parr, besides being heavy, had not been in a saddle for years. These advantages for Pop Hawley were—in the crowd's judgment—more than

(Continued On Page 110)

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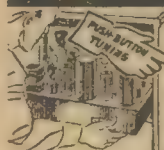

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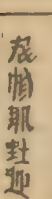

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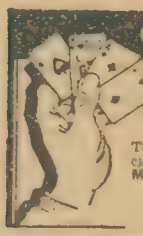

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 109)

offset by the greater age of old Pegasus.

A mile out from town the two enemies waited, glaring at each other, until Dude O'Dell, the gambler, rode up and told them to mount. Pop Hawley swung on smartly; and, after several attempts, "Porky" Parr found himself on the hurricane deck of his barrel-shaped mount.

O'Dell fingered his black string tie, and frowned at his watch. Then he lifted his revolver, and the shot shattered the silence of the sun-flayed prairie.

Parr dug in his spurs to make his surprised horse leap into the lead.

Pop Hawley, quivering with excitement, shrilled, *"Charge!"* and from that moment on, there was no race.

Like a bullet from a gun, the old war horse leapt into motion. He streaked past the lumbering animal he was racing, and ate up the distance with a relish that sent shivers of exultation darting down old Pop Hawley's spine.

It was a whooping bunch of cow-punchers and townsmen who lined the streets as old Pegasus charged down the main street of Sage Flats. There was a rattle of gunfire, and hats went sailing. Pop Hawley had a fleeting glimpse of Slim's surprised and grinning countenance, and of Sheriff Tanner waving a mortgage that had miraculously been lifted from the Hawley ranch.

"Stop, Pegasus!" the old man shrieked, pulling on the bridle. "Whoa, stop. What in darnation—!"

But Pegasus was no longer a buggy-horse. Hard-mouthed when he wanted to be, he was bolting down the main street as if he were leading a cavalry charge. Dazedly Pop Hawley remembered that the same thing had happened when he had raced into Five Forks. What had the officer said to stop the horse? In his excitement, the command had slipped the old man's memory.

"Stop, you runnin' fool!" old Hawley yelled. "Whoa, whoa! Do you aim to keep runnin' ontil yo're daid? Stop, you idjit!"

But Pegasus was once more in the days of his glory, and he would not stop. Through town he ran, and out across the prairie beyond. His sides were quaking with the effort, his body ran damply, but there was still courage in that gallant old heart.

IT WAS nearly an hour later that Pop Hawley walked slowly into town. His

(Continued On Page 112)

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Western Action

(Continued From Page 110)

eyes were swimming, and his lips quivered a little.

Slim, the banker and the sheriff stood together. The sheriff handed the mortgage to Pop Hawley, and he thoughtfully tore it to bits and let them dribble through his fingers. "Porky" Parr seemed to be accepting the defeat with surprising good grace.

He cackled loudly. "Couldn't keep yore seat, Pop. Threw you, did he? Where's my horse?"

The old man raised surprised eyes. "*Yore* hoss?"

"Pegasus!" the banker said impatiently.

"Now don't go and cause no ruckus," Slim said apologetically. "When Parr offered me two thousand dollars in cash dinero, I jest couldn't turn it down. That's a pow'ful good price for a hoss old as Pegasus."

"I'm going to win back more'n I lost from pilgrims what think a old hoss cain't run," Parr cackled. "Now don't try runnin' out on the trade. Sheriff Tanner here is a witness that you give Slim a power o' attorney to ack for you. Where'd that hoss throw you?"

"Got the money?" Pop Hawley asked Slim.

The cow-waddy removed a roll of bills from his pocket. "You ain't riled, Pop?" he asked anxiously. "I done what I thought best."

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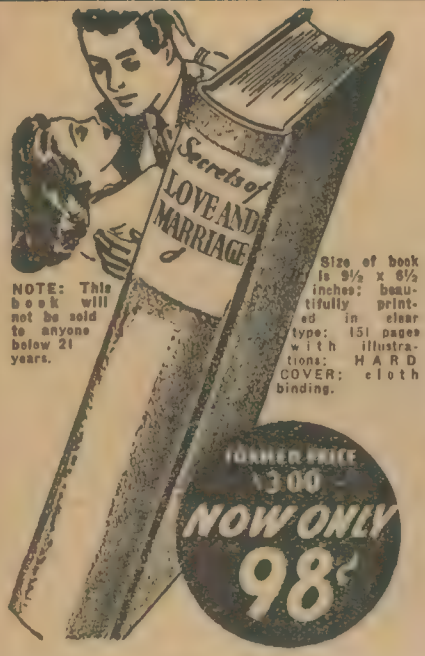

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How easy it is to pay for this combination of desk and Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable Typewriter! Just imagine, a small good will deposit with terms as low as 10c a day to get this combination at once! You will never miss 10c a day. Yet this small sum can actually make you immediately the possessor of this amazing office-at home combination. You assume no obligations by sending the coupon.

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

The Remington Noiseless Portable Typewriter is sold on a trial basis with a money back guarantee. If, after ten days trial, you do not wish to keep the typewriter, we will take it back, paying all shipping charges. You risk nothing in buying a Remington Portable Typewriter on terms as low as 10c a day.

THESE TWO EXTRA FOR YOU

LEARN TYPING FREE

To help you even further, you get free with this special offer a 32-page booklet, prepared by experts, to teach you quickly how to typewrite by the touch method. When you buy a Noiseless you get this free Remington Rand gift that increases the pleasure of using your Remington Noiseless Deluxe Portable. Remember, the touch typing book is sent free while this offer holds.

SPECIAL CARRYING CASE

The Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable is light in weight, easily carried about. With this offer Remington supplies a sturdy, beautiful carrying case which rivals in beauty and utility the most attractive luggage you can buy.

SPECIFICATIONS

ALL ESSENTIAL FEATURES of large standard office machines appear in the Noiseless Portable—standard 4-row keyboard; back spacer; margin stops and margin release; double shift key and shift lock; two color ribbon and automatic ribbon reverse; variable line spacer; paper fingers; makes as many as seven carbons; takes paper 9.5" wide; writes lines 8.2" wide. There are also extra features like the card writing attachment, black key cards and white letters, touch regulator, rubber cushioned feet. These make typing on a Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable a distinct pleasure. Thousands of families now using the Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable know from experience how wonderful it is!

MAIL COUPON NOW!

Remington Rand Inc., Dept. 164-1
465 Washington St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Tell me, without obligation, how to get a Free Trial of a new Remington Deluxe Noiseless Portable, including Carrying Case and Free 32-page Typing Instruction Booklet on terms as low as 10c a day. Send Catalogue.

Name. .....

Address.....

City.....State.....

"Give Me Your Measure Let Me Prove I Can Make You a NEW MAN!"

I DON'T care how old or young you are, or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add SOLID MUSCLE to your biceps —yes, on each arm—in double-quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

I Was a 97 lb. Weakling

I know, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs. I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

Then I discovered *"Dynamic Tension."* It gave me a body that won for me the title "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

When I say I can make you over into a man of giant power and energy, I know what I'm talking about. I've seen my new system, *"Dynamic Tension"* transform hundreds of weak, puny men into Atlas Champions.

What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do for You

Do you want big, broad shoulders — a fine, powerful chest—biceps like steel—arms and legs rippling with muscular strength—a stomach, ridged with bands of sinewy muscle—and a build you can be proud of? Then just give me the opportunity to prove that *"Dynamic Tension"* is what you need.

No "ifs," "ands," or "maybes." Just tell me where you want handsome, powerful muscles. Are you fat and flabby? Or skinny, and gawky? Are you short-winded, pepless? Do you hold back and let others walk off with the prettiest girls, best jobs, etc. Then write for details about *"Dynamic Tension"* and learn how I can make you a healthy, confident, powerful HE-MAN.

"Dynamic Tension" is an entirely NATURAL method. Only 15 minutes of your spare time daily is enough to show amazing results—and it's actually fun! *"Dynamic Tension"* does the work.

CHARLES ATLAS
Twice winner and holder of title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

FREE BOOK "Everlasting Health and Strength"

Mail the coupon right now for full details and I'll send you my illustrated book, "Everlasting Health and Strength." Tells all about my *"Dynamic Tension"* method. Shows actual photos of men I've made into Atlas Champions. It's a valuable book! And it's FREE. Send for your copy today. Mail the coupon to me personally. CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 4N, 115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 4N
115 East 23rd Street, New York, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of *"Dynamic Tension"* will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City.....State.....

Calling All Cars!

A MYSTERIOUS DISCOVERY SAVES UP TO 30% on GASOLINE!

OR COSTS NOTHING TO TRY

Answer this call! Investigate this remarkable discovery that trims dollars off gasoline bills —gives you worthwhile gas savings—more power — greater speed — quicker pickup — faster acceleration. Proven so efficient, it is guaranteed to save up to 30% and give better performance or the trial costs you nothing.

Automatic Supercharge Principle

Vacu-matic is *entirely different!* It operates on the supercharge principle by automatically adding a charge of extra oxygen, drawn free from the outer air, into the heart of the gas mixture. It is entirely automatic and allows the motor to "breathe" at the correct time, opening and closing *automatically* as required to save dollars on gas costs.

VACU-MATIC Scores Again

SETS NEW COAST-TO-CHICAGO RECORD

BOB McKENZIE

TRANSCONTINENTAL AUTOMOBILE CHAMPION

COAST TO COAST

Vacu-matic Carburetor Co.
7617 W. State Street
Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

Dear Sirs:

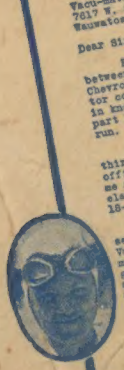
Having just completed a new speed record between Los Angeles and Chicago, driving a Chevrolet equipped with a Vacu-matic carburetor control, I thought you might be interested in knowing some of the facts and the important part Vacu-matic played in the success of the run.

The distance covered was 2322 miles in thirty-nine hours and forty-two minutes, officially timed by Western Union, which gave me an average speed of 59.7 M.P.H. based on elapsed time and with the Vacu-matic averaged 18-1/2 miles per gallon on gasoline.

Before leaving Los Angeles, we made several test runs both with and without the Vacu-matic, and the tests proved that Vacu-matic increased my gas mileage 5-1/2 miles per gallon at the driving speed of 60 M.P.H. and also very noticeable increase in both acceleration and power.

Yours very truly,

Bob McKenzie



In addition to establishing new mileage records on cars in all sections of the country, the Vacu-matic has proven itself on thousands of road tests and on dynamometer tests which duplicate road conditions and record accurate mileage and horse power increases.

You, too, can make a road test with Vacu-matic on your car and prove its worthwhile gas savings to your entire satisfaction.

Learn all about this remarkable discovery. Get the facts NOW!

Fits All Cars

Easy To Install

Vacu-matic is constructed of six parts assembled and fused into one unit, adjusted and *sealed at the factory.* Nothing to regulate. Any motorist can install in ten minutes. The free offer coupon will bring all the facts. Mail it today!

The Vacu-matic Co. Wauwatosa, Wis.

Sworn Proof of Gas Savings

This certifies that I have carefully read 300 original letters received from Vacu-matic users testifying to gas savings up to 30%, many reporting added power, smoother running, and quicker pick-up. These letters are just a small part of the larger file of enthusiastic user letters that I saw at the company offices.

Signed Marvin J. Clancy
Notary Public

AGENTS Get Yours FREE For Introducing

Vacu-matic offers a splendid opportunity for unusual sales and profits. Every car, truck, tractor, and motorcycle owner a prospect. Valuable territories now being assigned. If you help us introduce it to a friend, you can obtain your own free. Check and mail coupon today.

SEND THIS *Free Offer* COUPON

THE VACU-MATIC COMPANY
7617-626 W. State St., Wauwatosa, Wis.

Please send full particulars about VACU-MATIC, also how I may obtain one for my own car FREE. This does not obligate me in any way.

Name .....

Address .....

City..... State.....

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SCAN COURTSEY OF EXCITER